MARVEL MASTERWORKS
THE FANTASTIC FOUR
VOLUME 25

THE FANTASTIC FOUR Nos. 269-277, ANNUAL No. 18,
THE THING Nos. 19, 23 & EPIC ILLUSTRATED Nos. 26-34
JOHN BYRNE

MARVEL MASTERWORKS

PRESENTS

THE Fantastic Four

VOLUME 25

COLLECTING

THE FANTASTIC FOUR Nos. 269-277,

ANNUAL No. 18, THE THING Nos. 19, 23

& EPIC ILLUSTRATED Nos. 26-34

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MARVEL MASTERWORKS
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Nos. 269-277, Annual No. 18, The Thing Nos. 19, 23
& Epic Illustrated Nos. 26-34

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Fantastic Four created by Stan Lee & Jack Kirby

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INTRODUCTION
BY MICHAEL HIGGINS

I once hosted a party at "Stately Byrne Manor." That's what we used to call the residence John had moved to in Connecticut. I also used to call John "Byrnie-Byrne," and he responded by calling me "Higgie-Higgs." I was planning a party and John suggested his sprawling estate might be a more suitable venue than my apartment in Brooklyn, a veritable closet by comparison. And so, the Marvel Family—the editorial team along with some key freelancers—assembled for a barbecue blowout at the Byrne estate. Since it was *my* party, I even got to invite Chris Claremont to John Byrne's home…and he came! Astute comic fans will be quick to identify the fact that this was quite a momentous occasion indeed! The point of this is that, by and large, the editors and creators of Marvel's comics weren't just a bunch of co-workers, we were friends, and we truly enjoyed each other's company. A multitude of compelling conversations exploring diverse philosophies and myriad possibilities of worlds both real and imagined took place on the back porch of Stately Byrne Manor amongst the likes of Archie Goodwin, Roger Stern, Denny O'Neil, Mark Gruenwald…

Well, you get the idea.

This was the spirit of the time during which the stories in this collection were created. I had forgotten that Mark Gruenwald scripted *Fantastic Four Annual* #18. It was his debut on the title, although he had written the Thing's *Marvel-Two-In-One* series a few years earlier. *MTIO* was the first series Mark worked on with John Byrne, and I did a lot of the production work on those comics, like the computer-style lettering for Deathlok's balloons or cutting and pasting reverse photostats to make Nuklo appear negative. I was working pretty closely with Mark Gruenwald back then, including on an unpublished second issue of Mark's self-produced fanzine *Omniverse.* Mark and I were hired on staff one month apart, making us the new kids on Marvel's block at the same time.

Mike Carlin was Mark Gruenwald's assistant when work on *FF Annual* #18 began, but in the summer of 1984, he was promoted to full editor and took over the helm of *Fantastic Four*. I was included as part of the package. By that time, I'd already been assistant editor on *FF* for just about a year. *FF Annual* #18 is reminiscent of an old-time Annual, spotlighting a life-altering event in the principal characters' lives, rather than some blockbuster crossover "event." It's a standalone story, much like the Kirby/Lee classics when Reed and Sue were married or Sue gave birth to their first child. This time John decided to give us—at long last—the wedding of Black Bolt and Medusa. John cleverly tied the prologue in with some of his classic *X-Men* work, specifically the legendary death of Phoenix. Penciler Mark Bright even closely emulated a few of John's panels from that Marvel milestone. I knew Mark Bright from around the office, but this was one of the only times we ever worked together. After the book was inked, I didn't think some of Reed's faces looked close enough to John Byrne's version, so I took the liberty of touching up a few of them.

Our next issue, *FF* #269, marked the return of Wyatt Wingfoot to the pages of the *FF* after an absence of six years. In this issue Wyatt first meets She-Hulk, in whose life he'd play a significant role in the years to come. It also introduces Terminus in a storyline that continued into *FF* #270, which was the last full issue of the series I ever lettered.

It was very rare indeed that I would start to letter a comic and not finish it—typically, it would be the other way around, with me pitching in at the last minute to finish a job for someone else when they couldn't meet the final deadline—but that is what happened with *FF* #271…and I'm pretty sure I know why. *FF* #271 was cover dated October 1984. Roughly speaking, this means the book would have been in production about four months earlier. A check of the dates shows that I went to six Grateful Dead shows right about that time, so I was unquestionably "on the bus" when most of this issue was being lettered. *FF* #271 features an homage to the Jack Kirby monsters of the early 1960s and John's flashback art in this issue is clearly a nod to the Kirby/Ayers style that was prevalent in titles like *Tales to Astonish*, *Tales of Suspense*, *Strange Tales* and *Journey Into Mystery.*

FF #272 is the only issue lettered by Ken Bruzenak. I think his style was a really good fit for John's art. I wish he'd stayed aboard for a longer ride, and I would work with Ken again when I was editor of *Silver Surfer.* I suppose the biggest reason Ken didn't letter the next issue is that John Byrne decided he wanted to letter the book himself. And we're not talking about digital lettering, here, there was no such thing yet! John actually hand-lettered *FF* #273, making the art for the issue something rather unique. I can't think of another time the original art for a complete Marvel comic was created entirely by one person. Everything on the art boards was done single-handedly by John!

I have to admit, I wasn't sold on the idea of having John letter the book. I was familiar with John's lettering in fan work and at Charlton, but that was early in his career and he had advanced a long way since then. His penciling and inking had dramatically improved, but he hadn't been doing any lettering, so I was sightly apprehensive that it might not be up to John's usual standard of excellence and expertise. John would experiment with digital lettering in the future, but I don't think he lettered any comics the "old-fashioned way" after this job. Despite my concerns, Mike Carlin determined it would be best to just let John "get it out of his system." And, I guess he did, because after that one issue John relinquished the lettering chores on the book…but that wasn't all!

Ultimately, I think it very appropriate that John lettered *FF* #273, because, as it turned out, this was also the final issue that John would ink. John's stint as a one-man show was coming to an end, though I daresay the best was yet to come! For years, John had pretty much been inking all of his own work, notably every issue of *FF* since issue #232 and every issue of *Alpha Flight* through #14. However, speaking strictly as a fan of his work, I always liked John's pencils best. I think that is where he most excelled. And, when he inked his own pencils, John didn't have to pencil the pages as tightly as he would if someone else was going to ink them. In fact, pencils weren't sent into the office so we never saw the pages at that stage, missing out on an exciting part of the process.

I always preferred the fine line detail of the work John did in pencil, which I'd been privileged to see on a regular basis in the past, including on my very first visit to Marvel's office when Chris Claremont showed me the original art to one of John's earliest *Marvel Premiere* Iron Fist stories. So, I was not displeased when John decided he was going to devote his time to penciling and give up the inking chores on both *FF* and *Alpha Flight.* John had already made arrangements with our old friend Bob Wiacek to take over *Alpha Flight*, but that still left *Fantastic Four* without an inker. The search was on!

"May your criddle never britt!" I never quite knew what that meant, but that's how Al Gordon personalized the card Marie Severin created for my 20th birthday back in 1979. Al mostly inked Mark Gruenwald's *Spider-Woman* over Carmine Infantino's pencils back then, but he also inked one issue of *Marvel Team-Up* over John Byrne's pencils. In the interim, I think it is safe to say that Al had completely transformed his style, and in 1984 he was inking Mike Mignola's pencils on an upcoming miniseries called *Rocket Raccoon.* I was pretty impressed by Al's work over Mike…and I wanted to use him on *FF.* I remember showing John Byrne Al's recent work, and when John said, "Oh, it looks like Terry Austin," I knew we had our man.

The problem with assigning *FF* to Al was that it could only be a temporary arrangement. We knew from the start that when Mike Mignola had more pages, Al would be returning to *Rocket Raccoon.*

Al only did two issues, bridging the gap for us, but we still needed to find a *permanent* inker. Despite the fact that Jerry Ordway was already inking my old friend George Pérez on *Crisis on Infinite Earths* over at DC, Mike Carlin reached out to him and Jerry said he wouldn't have any problem inking *Fantastic Four* at the same time.

Personally, I didn't think John's work had ever looked better, which I attributed to Jerry being an excellent penciler in his own right. I even said so when I was featured in *Comics Interview* #29 in 1985, which Jerry saw in print. This meant that when we met face-to-face soon after at a then-trendy Mexican restaurant, it was like we were already friends. Jerry was absolutely the perfect addition to the *FF* family, and some of my favorite memories of working at Marvel are from this time period. We were young and we were having a lot of fun. John Workman, who'd worked with Mike when he was the assistant on Walt Simonson's *Thor*, also joined the team as the new regular letterer, helping to infuse the book with a distinctive new look.

FF #277 is another novelty, as there are two stories running synchronously, one across the top tier of the page and one across the bottom tier, each featuring half the team…sort of. The Reed and Sue story is on the bottom and the Johnny, Ben and She-Hulk story runs across the top. The problem with this is that we now had *five* characters in a title called *Fantastic Four.* This mathematical dilemma would be resolved in this crossover with *Thing* #23, where more fuel was added to the fire. With *Thing* #23, Mike Carlin replaced John Byrne as regular scripter. This was another assignment John yielded in order to focus more of his attention on penciling. Ron Wilson, a cornerstone of our team, continued on as penciler of the *Thing* in collaboration with Mike. Mike couldn't both edit and write *The Thing*, so we traded books with Mark Gruenwald. Mark replaced Mike as *Thing* editor in exchange for Mike and I taking over the editorial reins on *Captain America.* Also replacing Mike, who had written just a couple of issues, Mark became regular writer of *Cap* with issue #307, commencing an unprecedented tenure lasting almost eleven years—and it all started when these assignments were shuffled around.

The remainder of this *Masterworks* features *The Last Galactus Story*, serialized in Archie Goodwin's *Epic Illustrated.* This series reunited John Byrne with Terry Austin, inker of renown on John's quintessential *X-Men* run. Glynis Wein's coloring was reproduced by camera directly from her water-colored originals, utilizing what was then a state-of-the-art process, rather than the hand separation method commonly used on the regular comic line. John clearly set out to bestow upon readers a story of suitably *epic* proportions. John and Terry (with a little help from Bob Wiacek) produced 60 pages split over the nine published chapters…

…and then, as frequently happened in the unpredictable world of periodical publications, a decision came from above that *Epic Illustrated* would be canceled as of issue #34. In subsequent years, different options for finishing the story were considered. More than once, serious thought was given to reprinting the *Epic* material along with the final chapters in the graphic novel format. John could write and pencil new material for Terry to ink, or perhaps John might write it with a different penciler providing pages for Terry to finish, or maybe John could just wrap it all up himself. In the end, it doesn't matter too much, since none of these projects ever came to fruition. To this day *The Last Galactus Story* remains unfinished, still leaving us with a cosmic-grade cliff-hanger!

So, I am going to tell you how the story would have ended. Look out, there are spoilers ahead… if they can even be called that, since none of what follows was ever written, drawn or published. Still, you might want to save this part until after you read the nine chapters of the story that do exist. Even at that, things get a bit more complicated as there isn't just one possible ending to this story, there are two!

Back when this tale was conceived for *Epic*, John intended to reveal that the Watcher encountered by Galactus at the end of Chapter Nine was not Marvel Universe's beloved Uatu, but rather the Watcher who either created Galactus or was at least present at his birth. Driven to the brink of madness by guilt and feeling responsible for the loss of countless worlds to Galactus's hunger, this rogue Watcher engages Galactus in a battle of cosmic consequences. In the course of their timeless battle, Galactus absorbs all the energy in the entire universe. Only Galactus and his herald, Nova, survive. Galactus finally realizes his ultimate destiny, unleashing the unfathomable amount of energy he has absorbed, which explodes from within him as he becomes the Big Bang of a new universe. In the process, Nova is reborn as this new universe's incarnation of Galactus. The cycle of life and death begins again.

But John never did this story and, by 2001, had a different idea for how to end *The Last Galactus Story*, likely because this conclusion was also conceived as *Fantastic Four: The End* or, more appropriately, *The Last Fantastic Four Story*. Nova—sent back to our time from billions of years in the future—enlists the aid of the Fantastic Four. The FF travel back to the future with Nova using Doctor Doom's time machine, but Doctor Doom is alerted to their actions and follows along, intent on claiming Galactus's power for himself. A monumental battle ensues between the FF and Doom as Galactus confronts the rogue Watcher, and both Nova and the Thing die. Refusing to let Reed return to our time with Doctor Doom as his prisoner, Galactus orders Reed to leave Doom behind. In this version, after Galactus becomes the new Big Bang, it is Doctor Doom who assumes the new universe's role as the devourer of worlds, ironically granting his wish to claim the power of Galactus as his own!

So, take your pick. Both of these endings were conceived by John Byrne, and either way, the reader assumes the role of the rogue Watcher who witnesses it all.

I hope you enjoyed taking this little trip down memory lane with me to a time in my life that I look back on with very special fondness. As Mike Carlin has said to me on more than one occasion, "Who ever expected we'd be looking back on that time as 'the good old days?'" But for those of us who were there, that's exactly what they were!

Michael Higgins started his career with Marvel in 1978 as a Bullpen production staffer and over the next decade rose through the ranks, eventually becoming a full-fledged editor. After leaving his editorial position, Higgins continued to work for Marvel until 1999, writing, inking, coloring and lettering dozens of titles including Conan the Barbarian, *Wolverine in* Marvel Comics Presents, Punisher, Excalibur, Cable, X-51 *and* The Avengers.

MARVEL® ANNUAL

AT LONG LAST!

THE WEDDING OF BLACK BOLT AND MEDUSA!

Fantastic Four Annual™

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18
1984
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APPROVED BY THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY

BRIANS BRIGHT

PROLOG: TEN LUNAR ORBITS AGO

THE GENTLEMAN BEING PROPELLED AT 180 FEET PER SECOND ACROSS THE SURFACE OF THE MOON IS CALLED WOLVERINE. HE AND HIS COMRADES IN THE BAND OF EARTH MUTANTS KNOWN AS THE X-MEN HAVE BEEN ABDUCTED TO THE MYSTERIOUS BLUE AREA OF THE MOON TO DEFEND THE LIFE OF THE X-MAN CALLED PHOENIX. *

ACCIDENTALLY BREACHING THE INNER SANCTUM OF THE NIGH-OMNIPOTENT WATCHER, WOLVERINE IS FORCIBLY EXPELLED BY THE MOST CASUAL EXERCISE OF THE WATCHER'S POWER...

I SURE HOPE MY MUTANT HEALIN' POWERS AIN'T AFFECTED BY THE ARTIFICIAL ATMOSPHERE UP HERE. I'VE GOT A FEELING I'M GONNA NEED 'EM TO WALK AWAY FROM THIS LITTLE NOSE DIVE!

* AS TOLD IN THE IMMORTAL X-MEN #137.

JOHN BYRNE--PLOT MARK BRIGHT--PENCILS. MARK GRUENWALD--SCRIPT. MIKE GUSTOVICH --INKS.
PHIL FELIX--LETTERS. PETRA SCOTESE --COLORS. MICHAEL CARLIN --EDITOR. JIM SHOOTER--ED.-IN-CHIEF.

MINUTES AFTER MAKING A BONE-JARRING LANDING, THE RESILIENT MUTANT IS MET BY HIS TEAMMATE, ORORO MUNROE, ALSO KNOWN AS STORM!

WOLVERINE! THANK HEAVEN YOU'RE ALL RIGHT!

THAT'S A MATTER OF OPINION, BABE!

HUH? SOMETHING'S WRONG. THIS LOOKS LIKE 'RORO, SOUNDS LIKE HER, ACTS LIKE HER...

...BUT MY INSTINCTS, MY SENSES, ARE TELLIN' ME THIS AIN'T HER.

WOLVERINE, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!!

HOPIN' I DIDN'T JUST MAKE A BIG MISTAKE, LADY!

HER HANDS, AS I THREW HER, WERE TIGHTENING ON MY NECK. STORM WAS STARTIN' TO STRANGLE ME!

IMPOSSIBLE! YOU COULD NOT HAVE SEEN THROUGH MY DISGUISE!

A SHAPE-CHANGER!

WHERE'D YOU COME FROM, BUB?!

I AM RAKSOR, TERRAN -- A SKRULL WARRIOR.

I AM YOUR DEATH.

WANNA BET?

SNKT

SNKT

ZAP!

JUST BECAUSE MY SKRULL "ALLY" IS TOO *TERRIFIED* TO DEFEND HIMSELF, X-MAN, DOES NOT MEAN THAT HE IS COMPLETELY *HELPLESS*.

AT LEAST, NOT SO LONG AS HE HAS A *KREE WARRIOR* TO PROTECT HIM.

BE THANKFUL I DID NOT LEAVE YOU TO YOUR FATE. WE WERE MEANT TO BE OBSERVERS HERE, NOT PARTICIPANTS.

YOU!

YOU SAVED ME, KREE-- YOU?!!

THAT INSULT, I WILL NOT ENDURE!

HALA!

THE METAMORPHIC PROPERTIES OF YOUR ACCURSED RACE SHALL NOT AVAIL YOU AGAINST THE SUPERIOR STRENGTH OF A KREE SOLDIER, SKRULL!

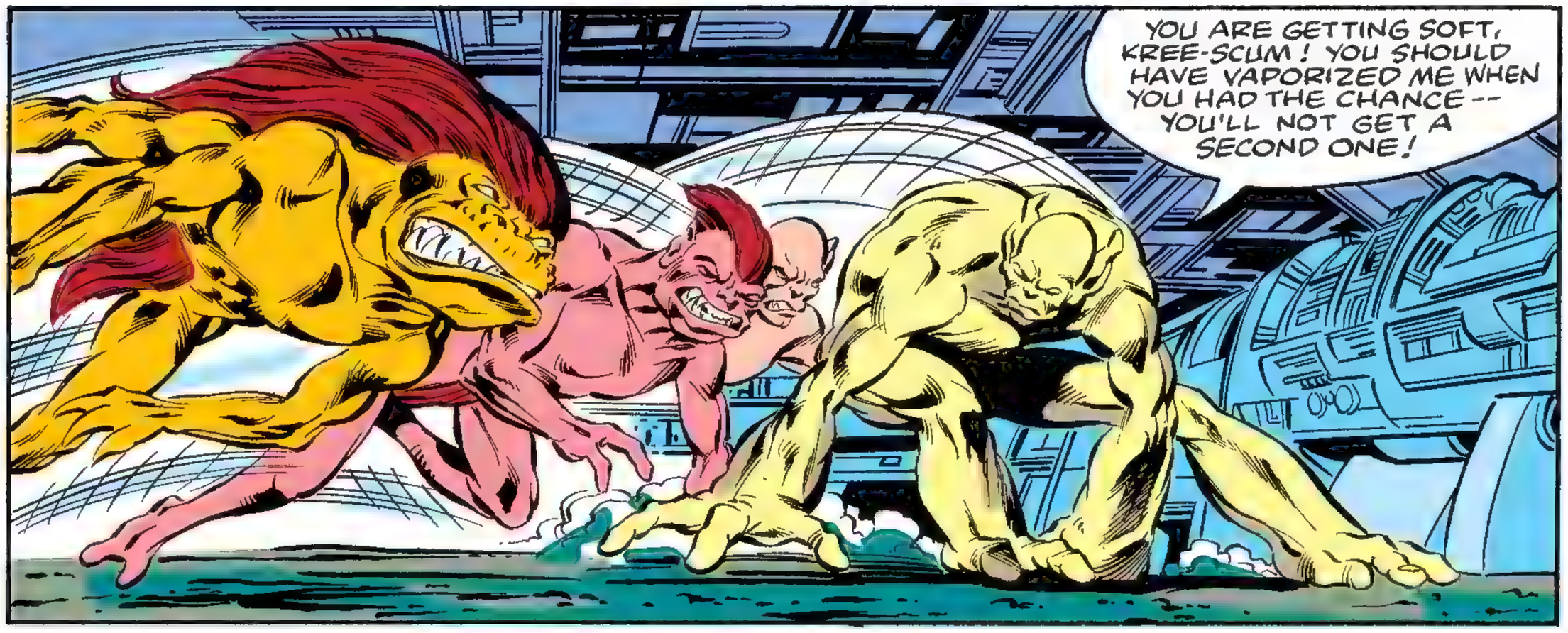
AS THE TWO ANCESTRAL ENEMIES CARRY THEIR BATTLE DEEPER INTO THE VAST RECESSES OF THE DEAD CITY, ALL THOUGHT OF WOLVERINE AND HIS COMPANIONS FLEE FROM THEIR BATTLE-FRENZIED BRAINS.

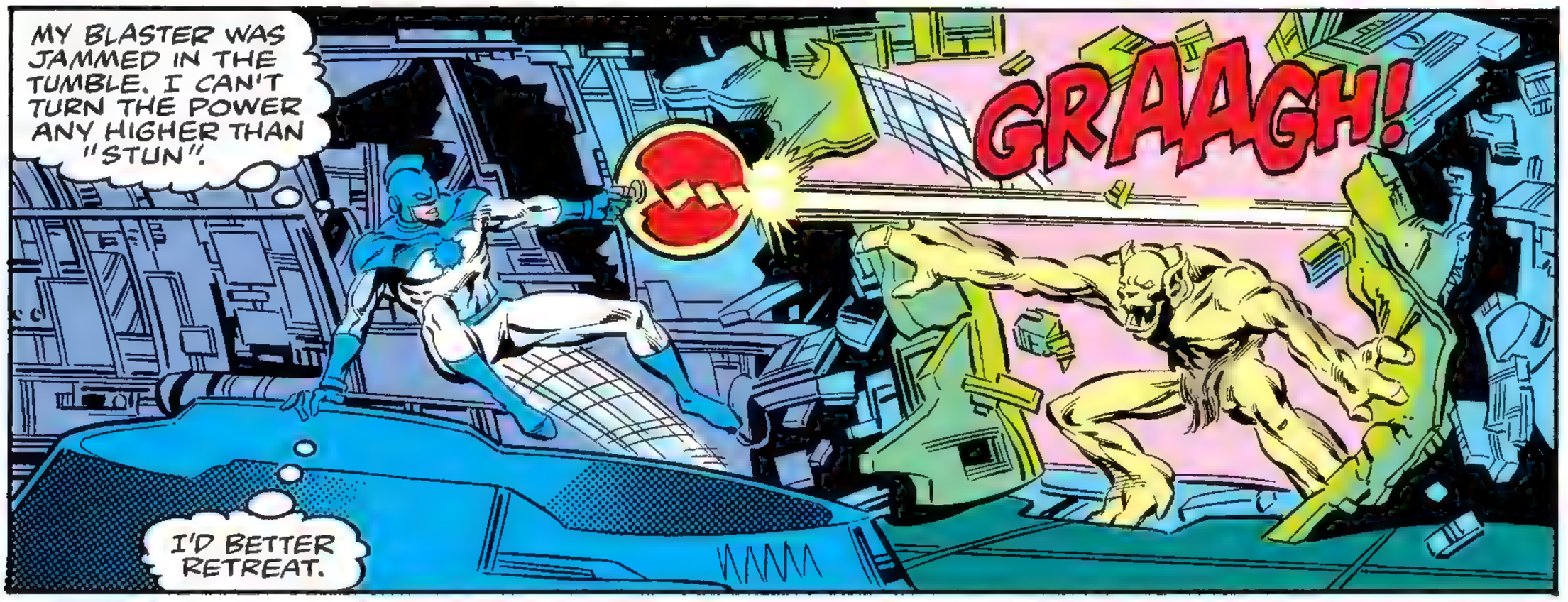
SUPERIOR STRENGTH, KREE-WORM? THEN WHY DO I STILL HAVE THE UPPER HAND?

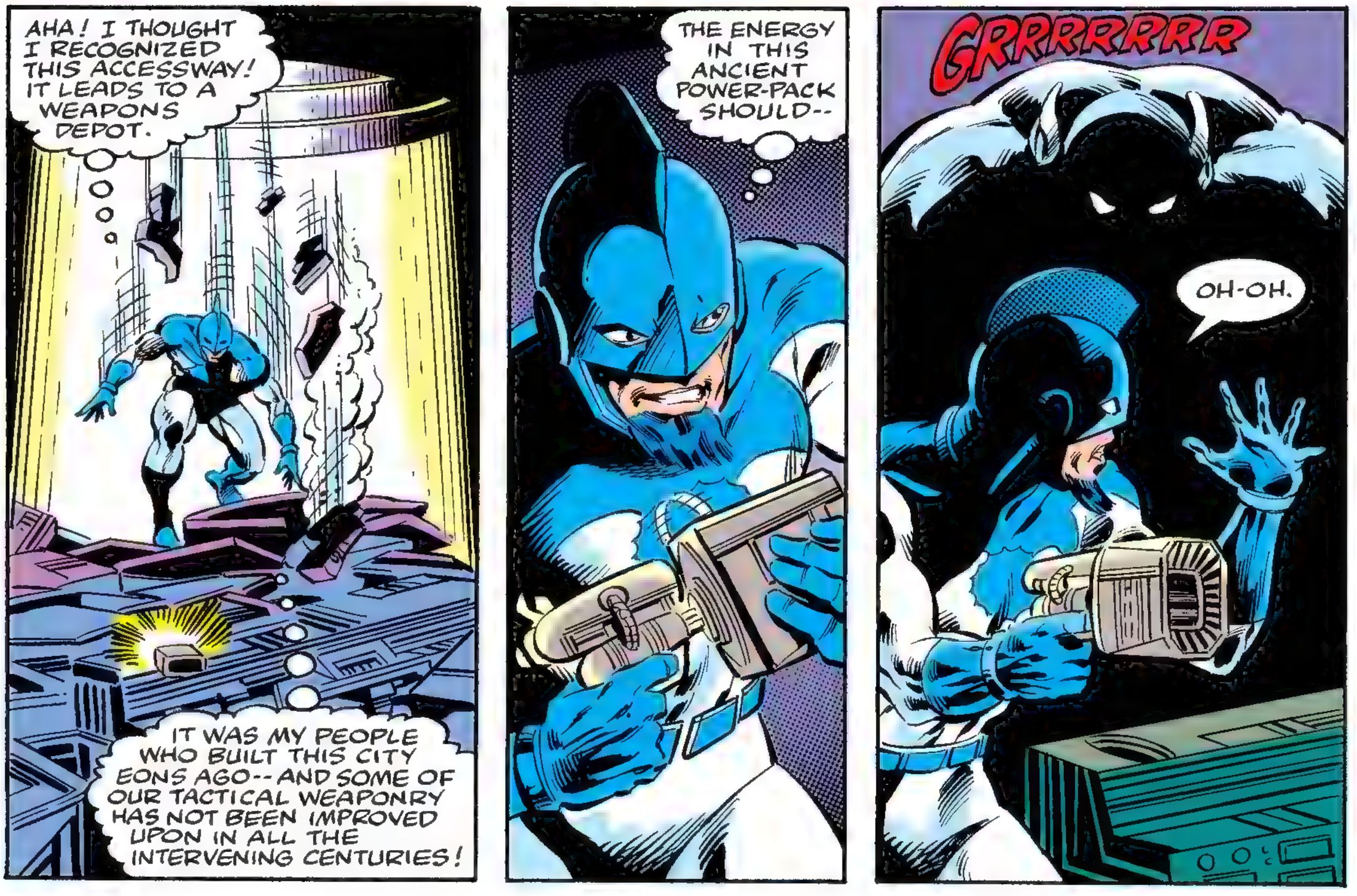
I'M JUST GETTING YOU IN RANGE, SKRULL--

ARGH!

--FOR MY UNI-BLASTER!


YOU ARE GETTING SOFT, KREE-SCUM! YOU SHOULD HAVE VAPORIZED ME WHEN YOU HAD THE CHANCE -- YOU'LL NOT GET A SECOND ONE!


MY BLASTER WAS JAMMED IN THE TUMBLE. I CAN'T TURN THE POWER ANY HIGHER THAN "STUN".
GRAAGH!
I'D BETTER RETREAT.


AHA! I THOUGHT I RECOGNIZED THIS ACCESSWAY! IT LEADS TO A WEAPONS DEPOT.
IT WAS MY PEOPLE WHO BUILT THIS CITY EONS AGO -- AND SOME OF OUR TACTICAL WEAPONRY HAS NOT BEEN IMPROVED UPON IN ALL THE INTERVENING CENTURIES!
THE ENERGY IN THIS ANCIENT POWER-PACK SHOULD--
GRRRRRRR
OH-OH.

NNNNNGH. CAUGHT ME BY SURPRISE...!

VTHOOM

BUT THE KREE WARRIOR'S BATTLE ARMOR AND SUPERHUMAN RESILIENCE PROTECT HIM FROM THE BONE-SHATTERING IMPACT.

AND THE COMBAT CONTINUES WITH FULL FORCE.

LOCKED IN BATTLE, THE TWO MIGHTY WARRIORS ARE OBLIVIOUS TO ALL ELSE...

NO LONGER DO THEY CARE ABOUT THE MOMENTOUS PROCEEDINGS THAT DEMANDED THE OFFICIAL PRESENCE OF EMISSARIES OF THEIR RIVAL EMPIRES.

NOR ARE THEY IN THE LEAST CONCERNED ABOUT THE TRAGIC SACRIFICE THAT BROUGHT THAT AFFAIR TO A SUDDEN END.

THE DEPARTURE OF ALL OF THE OTHER PARTICIPANTS IN THE TRIAL OF THE PHOENIX ALSO GOES UNNOTICED.

THE KREE AND THE SKRULL CARE ABOUT NOTHING SAVE THEIR OWN PRIVATE WAR.

TIME PASSES. MONTH-LONG LUNAR "DAYS" CRAWL BY. A NEW CIVILIZATION HAS SINCE BEEN TRANSPLANTED ON THE ANCIENT RUINS OF THE BLUE CITY, BUT THE TWO WARRIORS IN THE LOWER CATACOMBS ARE UNAWARE. THE WARFARE BETWEEN THE KREE AND THE SKRULL CONTINUES UNABATED, UNDISTURBED...

RAKSOR IS NEARBY. I CAN ALMOST SMELL HIM.

HALA GIVE ME STRENGTH TO BEST MY ANCIENT ENEMY THIS DAY!

WITH THE INVOCATION OF HIS NATIVE SUN-GOD, THE KREE SOLDIER'S MIND DRIFTS AN INSTANT, AS HE TRIES TO RECALL HOW MANY DAYS HE HAS BEGUN WITH THE SAME PRAYER...

HIS LIFE HAS TAKEN ON A RELENTLESS MONOTONY THESE PAST MONTHS ...

AT DAYBREAK, KREE-LAR GALACTIC TIME, HE RISES, BREAKFASTS--

--AND SPENDS THE MORNING STALKING OR BEING STALKED BY HIS FOE.

IN THE AFTER-NOON, THEY FIGHT.

AND IN THE EVENING, THEY RETREAT TO THEIR RESPECTIVE PLACES OF SANCTUARY--

--THERE TO BIND WOUNDS, REPAIR WEAPONRY, AND PLAN THE NEXT DAY'S STRATEGIES.

ALTOGETHER, NOT THE WORST WAY TO WAGE A WAR.

BUT THEN BEL-DANN'S MOMENT OF REVERIE IS ABRUPTLY SHATTERED.

PAMA!

I MUST NOT GET CARELESS. RAKSOR ALMOST CONNECTED.

ΞPFAUGH!Ξ I THOUGHT I HAD YOU THIS TIME, BEL-DANN!

DO YOU REALLY EXPECT ME NOT TO BE READY FOR YOUR AMBUSH, RAKSOR? YOU TRY THE SAME THING EVERY DAY!

YOU CARE TO SEE A NEW TACTIC THEN, BEL-DANN?

HAVE I SHOWN YOU WHAT A KOMOSIAN TENTACLE LOOKS LIKE?

NOT SINCE LAST WEEK, MY UNIMAGINATIVE ENEMY!

THEN PERHAPS YOU WOULD PREFER TO FIGHT A YIRBEK?

SINCE YOU ASKED, I DO LIKE IT WHEN YOU MIMIC ONE OF YOUR SLOW-MOVING THRALLS.

HEY! LET GO OF MY ROBO-RIFLE, YOU SLUG!

YOU ARE WEAPONLESS AT LAST, KREE DOG. NOW TO END THIS TIRESOME CHARADE IN THE NAME OF HER IMPERIAL MAJESTY R'KLLL!

OH, COME ON, RAKSOR. THIS ISN'T THE FIRST TIME YOU'VE DISARMED ME. I'LL STILL PIT MY SKILL AGAINST YOUR SHAPE-CHANGING TRICKS ANY TIME!

THEN PREPARE TO BE TORN APART, BEL-DANN!

I'M WAITING, RAKSOR.

BUT THEN--!

HOLD, WARRIORS. I--THE WATCHER OF THIS SPACE SECTOR --WOULD HAVE WORDS WITH YOU. THOUGH IT IS MY RACE'S CUSTOM TO NEVER INTERFERE IN THE AFFAIRS OF LESSER BEINGS--

--I DO NOT AT PRESENT HAVE ANY CHOICE. TO PREVENT YOU FROM ATTEMPTING ANY FUTILE GESTURES OF ESCAPE OR ATTACK, I ENCASE YOU IN SPHERES OF PURE THOUGHT!

NOW, YOU WILL COME WITH ME.

INSTANTANEOUSLY...

YOU ARE IN MY HOME. THERE IS TO BE NO VIOLENCE HERE. AM I UNDERSTOOD?

YES.

YES.

WE KREE HAVE HEARD OF THESE WATCHERS. THEY ARE SAID TO HAVE POWER BEYOND IMAGINING. I HAD BEST DO AS HE SAYS... FOR NOW.

I HAVE RECEIVED MESSAGES INTENDED FOR YOU... SENT BY THE HEADS OF YOUR RESPECTIVE EMPIRES.

BEHOLD, AS I RE-ESTABLISH COMMUNICATION.

SUDDENLY, TWO IMAGES FAMILIAR TO THE ALIEN TRIO SHIMMER INTO EXISTENCE, SPEAKING TO THE TWO SOLDIERS IN THEIR NATIVE TONGUES...

COLONEL BEL-DANN... HEAR THE DECREE OF THE SUPREME INTELLIGENCE OF THE KREE EMPIRE.

WARLORD RAKSOR--ATTEND THE WORDS OF SKRULL EMPRESS R'KLLL THE FIRST OF THE HOUSE OF T'RYSS. *

* THIS TRANSMISSION WAS SENT BEFORE THE EVENTS DEPICTED IN FANTASTIC FOUR #257.

"THE EPOCH-LONG WAR BETWEEN THE KREE AND SKRULL EMPIRES, SEPARATED AS THEY ARE BY GALACTIC DISTANCES, HAS BEEN A VAST DRAIN ON THE RESOURCES OF BOTH EMPIRES. THE LATEST FULL-SCALE CAMPAIGN HAS PROVEN THAT WE ARE FAR TOO EVENLY MATCHED FOR A DECISIVE VICTORY OF ONE OVER THE OTHER. *

* AS SEEN IN AVENGERS #93-97.

AFTER COUNTLESS HOURS OF PAINSTAKING NEGOTIATIONS, THE SUPREMOR AND I HAVE DECIDED TO CHANGE THE VERY WAY IN WHICH OUR WAR SHALL BE FOUGHT!

IT IS A WAY IN WHICH WE WILL DRASTICALLY CURTAIL THE EXPENDITURE OF OUR RESOURCES, AS WELL AS PROVIDE A MEANS TO MEASURE A CLEAR-CUT VICTORY.

WE HAVE DECIDED THAT YOU TWO WARRIORS, THE EPITOME OF ALL THAT IS GREAT IN EACH OF OUR MIGHTY RACES, SHALL BE THE CHAMPIONS OF EACH EMPIRE. YOU WILL CONTINUE THE SINGLE-WARRIOR COMBAT THAT YOU HAVE INDEPENDENTLY BEGUN--

--WITH THIS IMPORTANT DIFFERENCE. THE WINNER OF YOUR COMBAT WILL DETERMINE FOR ALL TIME THE *ULTIMATE VICTOR* IN OUR EONS-OLD WAR OF EMPIRES...!

SOLDIERS, DO YOU ACCEPT THIS HONOR?

AYE, MY QUEEN.

I DO, SUPREMOR.

WATCHER--WILL YOU AGREE TO BE THE FINAL ARBITER IN THE BATTLE? BOTH THE EMPRESS AND OURSELF BELIEVE THAT THE IMPARTIALITY OF YOUR RACE IS LEGEND.

ALTHOUGH I HAVE BEEN LOATHE TO INTERFERE EVEN TO THE EXTENT OF FORWARDING YOUR MESSAGE TO YOUR CHAMPIONS, I AGREE TO BE YOUR ARBITER.

IT IS THE LOT OF MY RACE TO BE THE SERVANTS OF DESTINY.

THEN, WARRIORS, SIGNIFY THE BEGINNING OF THE LAST BATTLE IN THE KREE-SKRULL WAR BY THE RITUAL OF HANDS, AND GO TO YOUR BATTLE STATIONS. MAY THE BEST MAN--THE BEST EMPIRE--*WIN!*

AS THE IMAGES FADE, THE TWO WARRIORS STRIDE AWAY DETERMINEDLY, THEIR SPIRITS SOARING WITH THE UNPRECEDENTED HONOR NOW BESTOWED UPON THEM. THERE IS NOT THE SLIGHTEST DOUBT IN EITHER OF THEIR MINDS WHO IS THE SUPERIOR.

AS FOR THE WATCHER, HIS THOUGHTS REMAIN EVER UNFATHOMABLE.

Stan Lee PRESENTS: THE FANTASTIC FOUR:®

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW!

REJOICE! THE DAY IS COME!

ATTILAN! ONCE ONE OF THE STRANGEST CITIES ON EARTH! NOW, AFTER A 240,000 MILE VOYAGE UNDERTAKEN A FEW SHORT MONTHS AGO, THE STRANGEST--IF NOT THE ONLY--CITY ON THE MOON. *

ATTILAN! NESTLED IN A CORNER OF THE RUINS OF THE LONG-DEAD BLUE CITY OF THE KREE...UNWITTING NEIGHBOR TO THE HOME-BASE OF THIS SECTOR'S WATCHER AND THE KREE-SKRULL WAR BEING WAGED IN THE CATACOMBS BELOW...

HEY, RAMUS--SAVE ME A SEAT WITH A VIEW OF THE ALTAR!

ATTILAN! HOME OF THE INHUMANS, A WONDROUS SUB-SPECIES OF THE HUMAN RACE CREATED BY KREE EXPERIMENTERS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE LAST ICE AGE...

WOW! EVERYONE IS TURNING OUT FOR THIS!

YOU'RE NOT GOING TO SEE ME BRAVE THAT CROWD. I'M GOING TO WATCH IT ALL FROM HERE!

ATTILAN! TODAY THE SITE OF THE MOST FESTIVE CELEBRATION SINCE THE KING AGON, SON OF SYMAK, WED RYNDA OF THE MAGNAR CLAN 84 EARTHLY YEARS AGO.

* SEEN IN FANTASTIC FOUR #240.

THE INHUMANS ARE A DIVERSE RACE. THEY COME IN EVERY SHAPE AND COLOR, AND BOAST A WIDE VARIETY OF NON-HUMAN PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS...

YAH-HEY! I'VE BEEN SELECTED TO FLY IN THE HONOR GUARD!

YOU THINK THE ALPHAS WILL TRY TO SPOIL THE CEREMONY?

I'VE GOT 40 DREN THAT SAY THEY WON'T.

WINGS, SCALES, FINS, HIDE, TAILS, FUR, HOOVES ... EVEN LEAVES AND BERRIES ARE ALL CONSIDERED NORMAL TRAITS AMONG THE INHUMANS.

LOOK! THERE'S WEBELOS OF THE GENETICS COUNCIL!

ALL HAIL THE QUEEN-TO-BE!

SAY, DID I TELL YOU THAT I ONCE DATED HER HIGHNESS?

GIVE US A BREAK, GITEL.

THOUGH ALL INHUMANS ARE BORN GENETICALLY PERFECT, MOST ARE BAPTISED IN THE SACRED TERRIGEN MIST, A MUTAGENIC CATALYST ABLE TO UNLOCK THE POTENTIAL OF THE DNA CHAIN...

TWO MORE HOURS TO THE CEREMONY!

GET YOUR COMMEMORATIVE BANNERS HERE!

BECAUSE NO TWO INDIVIDUALS ARE EXACTLY ALIKE, EACH OF THE 1,230 INHUMANS CAN BE CONSIDERED A MINORITY GROUP OF ONE. BUT TODAY, EVERY FREE CITIZEN OF ATTILAN HAS ELECTED TO BECOME PART OF A VERY VOCAL MAJORITY...

DON'T CROWD-- YOU'LL ALL GET TO SEE!

DID YOU BRING THE TISSUES, AYRAM? I ALWAYS CRY AT THESE THINGS.

COMMEMORATIVE BUTTONS!

LOOK! LOCKJAW'S BROUGHT THE HUMANS!

ABOUT TIME!

THE ROYAL FAMILY HOLDS THEM IN SUCH ESTEEM THEY'D PROBABLY POSTPONE THE CEREMONY TILL THEY GOT HERE!

GREETINGS, HUMANS!

DON'T BE IMPUDENT, SMILO-- CALL THEM BY THEIR NAMES!

HI, FANTASTIC FOUR!

HELLO, EVERYONE!

GOOD THING THE INHUMANS ARE TAUGHT ALL EARTHLY LANGUAGES.

HULLO.

UH, HI.

SAY, WHERE'S THAT BIG ORANGE FELLOW.?

MAKE ROOM! LET THEM THROUGH!

REED! SUSAN! JOHNNY! OVER HERE!

LOOK-- THERE'S CRYSTAL, THE MAIDEN OF HONOR!

SHE USED TO LIVE WITH THE HUMAN FOUR, DIDN'T SHE?

GEE WHIZ--HERE I AM, A GIRL WHO'S NEVER EVEN BEEN TO EUROPE, AND THIS IS MY SECOND TIME ON THE MOON!

HOW'S IT GOING, KARNAK?

QUITE WELL, JOHNNY STORM. I SEE BEN GRIMM IS NOT WITH YOU.

YEAH. HE'S OFF IN DEEP SPACE PLAYING EXPLORER.*

OH SUSAN--HOW LOVELY YOU LOOK. I, UH, HEARD ABOUT YOUR MISFORTUNE. I'M SO SORRY.

THANK YOU.

HELLO, GORGON...TRITON. I'M ALWAYS GLAD WHEN OUR GET-TOGETHERS ARE NOT PRECIPITATED BY A CRISIS!

SO AM I, REED RICHARDS.

*SEE CURRENT ISSUES OF **THE THING.**

LISTEN FOLKS. THIS LOVELY GREEN LADY IS JENNIFER WALTERS, THE ***SHE-HULK.*** SHE'S FILLING IN FOR THE THING WHILE HE'S OFF IN THE VOID.

UH, JOHNNY... WE'VE ALL MET.

I WAS HERE A FEW MONTHS AGO WITH THE AVENGERS WHEN THE U.N. SECURITY COUNCIL CALLED THE F.F. ON THE CARPET ABOUT HELPING THE INHUMANS MOVE UP HERE.*

*AVENGERS ANNUAL #12.

OH, YEAH.

I HOPE THIS STAY IS MORE PLEASANT THAN YOUR LAST.

OH, I'M SURE IT WILL BE, KARNAK.

HMM. WHEN LAST SHE WAS HERE, THE SHE-HULK BESTED ME IN COMBAT!

BY KORATH, I LIKE THAT IN A WOMAN!

LOOK--UP IN THE SKY!

IT'S OUR LIEGE!

THE KING APPEARS! THE WEDDING CAN BEGIN!

I TAKE IT THE BRIDE AND GROOM ARE STILL GETTING--WAIT. THE CROWD IS ROARING.

HMM. LAST TIME I WAS AT AN INHUMAN WEDDING--CRYSTAL'S--I FELT ALL BROKEN INSIDE. NOW WHEN I LOOK AT HER, THE FEELINGS I HAD FOR HER SEEM SO UNREAL.

LIKE A MAJESTIC BIRD OF PREY, BLACK BOLT, MONARCH OF THE INHUMANS, SOARS FROM HIS PRIVATE PALACE ABOVE THE THRONG CHANTING HIS NAME.

BLACK BOLT'S DOUR VISAGE DOES NOT YET BETRAY THAT THIS IS A DAY TO REJOICE, A DAY HE HAS WAITED FOR SINCE HIS BETROTHAL AS A YOUTH--THIS IS HIS LONG-AWAITED WEDDING DAY TO THE LADY MEDUSA!

UNLESS ONE KNEW BETTER, ONE MIGHT READ THE MUTE KING'S MOOD AS PRE-NUPTIAL NERVOUSNESS.

AS HIS KEEN BLUE EYES PICK OUT THE CONTINGENT OF HIS HUMAN FRIENDS AND INHUMAN COUSINS, BLACK BOLT FORCES HIS COUNTENANCE TO RELAX...

BLACK BOLT!

JUST WAIT TILL YOU SEE MEDUSA'S GOWN, SUE!

ON BEHALF OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR, I'D LIKE TO SAY THAT WE ARE DEEPLY HONORED TO BE INVITED TO SHARE THIS JOYOUS OCCASION WITH YOU AND YOUR FAMILY.

BEN IS UNABLE TO ATTEND, BUT I'M SURE HIS THOUGHTS WOULD BE HERE WITH YOU, TOO.

AS FOR ME, BLACK BOLT, I WISH YOU AND MEDUSA ALL THE HAPPINESS IN MARRIAGE THAT REED AND I HAVE KNOWN.

--IT IS TIME TO GET YOU DRESSED FOR THE CEREMONY.

RICHARDS, WE HAVE RESERVED STATIONS OF HONOR FOR YOU AND YOUR GROUP NEAR THE FRONT OF THE AMPHITHEATER. SEE YOU THERE.

SELDOM HAVE I SEEN GORGON IN SUCH A FESTIVE MOOD!

COME NOW, COUSIN-- YOU HAVE FACED FAR MORE FEARSOME THINGS THAN WHAT LIES AHEAD!

SAY CRYSTAL, FROM WHAT I GATHERED FROM F.F. FILES, BLACK BOLT AND MEDUSA HAVE BEEN SWEET ON EACH OTHER SINCE WAY BACK.

HOW COME THEY'RE JUST NOW TYING THE KNOT?

WELL, JENNIFER... LENGTHY ENGAGE-MENTS ARE AN INHUMAN CUSTOM.

LOOKS TO ME LIKE EVEN KINGS ARE SUBJECT TO PRE-WEDDING JITTERS.

JENNIFER--SUSAN--WE HAVE A LITTLE TIME BEFORE THE CEREMONY BEGINS. WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE BABY LUNA? YOU WON'T BELIEVE HOW SHE'S GROWN.

I'D LOVE TO.

SOUNDS GOOD TO ME.

HELLO, THE HUMAN TORCH!

HI.

THAT'S ODD. JOHNNY HARDLY BLINKED WHEN THAT WOMAN FLIRTED WITH HIM. COULD HE STILL BE PINING FOR CRYSTAL?

GEE, I WISH ALICIA WERE HERE. SHE'D LOVE ALL THIS.

HUMANS ARE SO UNFRIENDLY.

GLORIOUS DAY, O FRIEND OF THE KING!

GREETINGS, HUMAN TORCH. I'M WEEBWOW. LISTEN, IF YOU NEED AN ESCORT FOR THE NUPTIAL BALL TONIGHT, HAVE I GOT A GIRL FOR YOU!

NO THANKS.

THOUGH I'VE VISITED ATTILAN MANY TIMES, I SELDOM GET THE CHANCE TO MINGLE WITH THE COMMON FOLK-- IF YOU CAN CALL ANYONE HERE "COMMON".

AN HOUR LATER, THE LONG-AWAITED CEREMONY BEGINS! A HUSH FALLS OVER THE CROWD AS BLACK BOLT, FLANKED BY THREE MALE COUSINS, MOUNTS THE PUBLIC PROSCENIUM BEFORE THE SHRINE OF RANDAC, FIRST KING OF THE INHUMANS...

ALTHOUGH BLACK BOLT'S THOUGHTS ARE EVER GUARDED, SURELY HE IS NOW THINKING OF HIS OWN FATHER AGON, FORMER KING OF THE INHUMANS, AND HOW HE STOOD AT THIS VERY SPOT SO MANY YEARS AGO.

FROM HIS SUITE AT THE ROYAL PALACE, QUICKSILVER, MUTANT HUSBAND OF CRYSTAL, BROODS...

I AM EVER THE OUTSIDER HERE, THOUGH MY WIFE IS THE QUEEN'S SISTER--!

AM I BITTER THAT I WAS GIVEN NO PART TO PLAY IN THESE PROCEEDINGS, OR AM I MERELY JEALOUS THAT MY OWN WEDDING WAS A PRIVATE CEREMONY?

WHILE, FRONT ROW CENTER...

WOW. CRYSTAL'S WEDDING WASN'T HALF THE SHINDIG THIS IS. WONDER IF IT'S CAUSE SHE MARRIED OUTSIDE THE TRIBE OR IF ONLY KING'S WEDDINGS ARE THIS ELABORATE?

WAIT TILL YOU SEE MEDUSA, JOHNNY BOY--SHE'S GONNA KNOCK YOUR SOCKS OFF!

AND TO THE FANFARE OF FIFTY TRUMPETS FROM ON HIGH, THE LADY MEDUSA MAKES HER STATELY ENTRANCE...

...HER YOUNGER SISTER BEARING HER SILKEN TRAIN.

< WONDROUS MULTITUDE-- WE ARE GATHERED ON THIS GLORIOUS DAY-- * >

*TRANSLATED FROM TILAN.

<--TO BEAR WITNESS TO THE JOINING OF TWO UNIQUE LIVES...OUR KING, BLACKANTOR BOLTAGON, SON OF AGON AND RYNDA-->

<--AND OUR LADY-IN-WAITING, MEDUSALITH ANAQUELIN, DAUGHTER OF QUELIN AND AMBUR . >

<STAND FORTH, MY FRIENDS! >

HELLO, CRYSTAL-- WOULD IT BE OKAY IF WE STAND BY YOU?

PIETRO?! OF COURSE, SILLY!

<THOUGH CUSTOM DICTATES THE PRESENCE OF A PRIEST AT THIS CEREMONY, NO THIRD PARTY MARRIES A MAN AND WOMAN. IT IS THEY WHO MARRY ONE ANOTHER. >

< MARRIAGE IS A PARADOX. IT LIBERATES IN THE CREATION OF NEW BONDS. >

<TWO UNIQUE, NEVER-TO-BE-DUPLICATED LIVES ENTWINE--EACH ENHANCING ITS OWN INDIVIDUALITY-- >

<--WHILE CREATING A NEW SIGNIFICANCE OF TWO. >

< THE STATE OF MARRIAGE BEGINS LONG BEFORE THE WEDDING. IT BEGINS WHEN TWO PEOPLE DISCOVER ONE ANOTHER, GROW TOGETHER, AND COME AT LAST TO RECOGNIZE THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THEIR LOVE. >

< THIS CEREMONY THEN CREATES NO NEW RELATIONSHIP, BUT ACKNOWLEDGES AND CELEBRATES THE RELATIONSHIP THAT OUR LIEGE AND HIS LADY HAVE BEEN CREATING AND WILL CONTINUE TO CREATE. >

< THIS CEREMONY IS A PUBLIC PROCLAMATION OF A PRIVATE PLEDGE--AN ANNOUNCEMENT TO THE UNIVERSE THAT THIS MAN AND THIS WOMAN VOW TO PLACE THEIR LOVE BEFORE ALL ELSE. >

< AND SO, BEFORE THE WONDROUS MULTITUDE, I BID YOU TOUCH YOUR HANDS AS WE ALL JOIN IN THE LITANY OF LIGHT--! >

BREATH-TAKING.

NEAT.

TOTALLY AWESOME.

FASCINATING.

BUT JUST AS THE ASSEMBLED POPULACE JOINS THEIR VOICES IN THE RITUAL WEDDING CHANT, ATTILAN IS WRENCHED APART IN A CATACLYSMIC EARTHQUAKE!

WHAT IN--?

AAAAiiiiEE!

KRRRRROOMM

JEN, JOHNNY-- GO LIMP-- I'LL CATCH YOU!

REED-- WHAT HAPPENED? DID BLACK BOLT ACCIDENTALLY SPEAK--?

NO, JOHNNY-- THE PATTERN OF DEVASTATION IS ASKEW FOR BLACK BOLT TO BE AT ITS FOCAL POINT.

THERE DOES NOT APPEAR TO BE ANY AFTER-SHOCK EFFECTS. I THINK THE DANGER IS OVER.

THANK GOODNESS. WE'D BEST SEE TO THE INJURED!

THAT MAY HAVE TO WAIT A BIT, SUE ! LOOK--BLUE FLAME ERUPTING FROM THE FISSURE !

RIIIIP!

WE ARE AT THE CITY'S EDGE ! IT SEEMS TO BE ORIGINATING FROM OUTSIDE !

WELL, I'M GOING TO TAKE A LOOK-SEE !

SHE-HULK... BE CAREFUL ! WE'LL BE RIGHT BEHIND YOU !

DON'T WORRY, REED. I'M A BIG GIRL NOW.

WOW. THEY SURE BUILT THIS PLACE TO LAST ! THOUGH A FEW BUILDINGS ARE HALF-BURIED OR LEANING FUNNY, THEY HARDLY SEEM TO BE DAMAGED ! HOPE MOST OF THE INHUMANS ARE EQUALLY DURABLE.

HEY--I'M ALMOST AT THE CITY LIMITS.

ANOTHER FEW PACES AND--

YIIIII ! WHAT'S HAPPENING-- I'M SUDDENLY FLYING LIKE CRAZY ! STRAIGHT INTO THE FIRE--!

SHE-HULK--! SHE MUST NOT HAVE KNOWN ABOUT ATTILAN'S GRAVITY GENERATORS SUPPLYING AN EARTH-LIKE GRAVITY. PASSING BEYOND THEM, THE MOON'S 1/6 EARTH GRAVITY IS ALL THAT IS IN EFFECT!

JOHNNY-- YOU'RE THE ONLY ONE FAST ENOUGH TO--

I'M ON MY WAY, REED!

FLAME ON!

MAN-- I'VE GOT TO FLY LIKE I'VE NEVER FLOWN BEFORE. JENNIFER IS ONE TOUGH CUSTOMER-- BUT THAT WEIRD BLUE FIRE MIGHT EVEN BE ABLE TO ROAST *HER!*

GOT YOU!

NICE TIMING, SPORT! I THINK MY LOVELY JADE COMPLEXION WAS STARTING TO TURN LOBSTER RED!

GOOD THING YOU'RE ON THE TEAM AND NOT BENJY. I'D NEVER HAVE BEEN ABLE TO TOW HIS BULK OUT OF THERE.

IF THAT'S MEANT AS A COMPLIMENT, JOHNNY-- THANKS. I THINK.

GOOD LAD! HE DID IT! COME ON--LET'S SEE IF WE CAN HELP!

OF ALL DAYS FOR THIS TO HAPPEN!

COULD THIS BE ANOTHER SCHEME OF BLACK BOLT'S MAD BROTHER MAXIMUS?

I PITY HIM IF IT IS!

TORCH! SHE-HULK! SEE ANYTHING?

WELL, THE FLAMES SEEM TO BE ORIGINATING FROM UNDER THIS PLATE OF MOON-ROCK!

KRANCK

ALLOW ME.

AFTER MAKING A FLYING FOOL OF MYSELF OUT THERE, YOU'VE GOT TO LET ME MAKE MYSELF USEFUL.

REED-- A SHAFT LEADING WAY UNDERGROUND. LET'S GO!

DON'T FLY AHEAD--WE'LL GO AS A GROUP!

NO SIGN OF THE BLUE FIRE ANYWHERE. I WONDER HOW IT COULD HAVE DIED DOWN SO QUICKLY.

HEY, REED--TAKE A LOOK AT *THIS!*

THE WHOLE FOUNDATION OF ATTILAN SEEMS BATTERED AND MANGLED--LIKE SOMEONE'S BEEN PURPOSELY DOING A NUMBER ON IT!

OUR WORKING CLASS, THE ALPHAS, ARE THE ONLY ONES WHO FREQUENT THESE MAINTENANCE AREAS, JOHNNY STORM. IT IS POSSIBLE THEY ARE REBELLING AGAIN.

I DON'T THINK SO, GORGON! OUR LIAISONS WITH THEM REPORT NO--

(INTERLOPERS, BEGONE! THIS IS A WAR ZONE!)*

HOLY COW--IT'S A SKRULL!

NNNGH.

PIETRO!

AARGH.

* TRANSLATED FROM THE SKRULLIAN.

(STRANGE...I WAS NOT AWARE THAT ANY PART OF THE BLUE CITY WAS INHABITED! NO MATTER! I MUST VANQUISH THESE BLUNDERERS QUICKLY LEST MY TRUE FOE BEST ME WHILE I AM DISTRACTED!)

(SO ONE OF YOU POSSESSES THE POWER OF FLIGHT, EH?)

(NO MATTER. MY POWER GAUNTLETS ALSO ENHANCE MY STRENGTH AND SPEED A HUNDREDFOLD!)

(OBSERVE!)

<YOU HAVE THE LOOK OF AN EARTHLING ABOUT YOU. I *DESPISE* EARTHLINGS.>

HE-- FELLED BLACK BOLT!

I MUST STOP HIM--!

<WHAT'S THIS? TENTACLES? NO-- IT'S *HAIR!*>

<A SIMPLE NEURO-BLAST WILL SUBDUE HER.>

AAAAGH!

ATAGIRL, SUSIE! YOU ATTACK HIM WITH YOUR INVISIBLE FORCE --

ULLK.

--AND I'LL FOLLOW THROUGH WITH A COUPLE OF FIREBALLS!

FIRE--? COULD THIS BE ONE OF THE INFAMOUS FANTASTIC FOUR? BAH-- I HAVE NO TIME FOR THIS!

SEALED SHUT.

I CAN PROBABLY SQUEEZE MY PLIABLE FORM THROUGH THE CRACK BETWEEN THE DOOR AND THE FRAME...

NO GO, BROTHER-IN-LAW. IT'S TOO DANGEROUS TO GO IN THERE WITHOUT BACK-UPS!

<HMM. THESE EARTHMEN SEEM TO HAVE ABILITIES BEYOND THEIR RACIAL NORM. I HAD BEST NOT WASTE MY TIME IN IDLE COMBAT WHILE-->

LET ME TRY, REED RICHARDS. IT IS MY DISCIPLINE TO BE ABLE TO SENSE THE WEAKEST SPOT IN ANY OBJECT -- AND MY POWER TO SHATTER IT!

I TOOK A QUICK RECON, REED! THE SKRULL DIDN'T POP OUT ANYWHERE NEARBY!

DEFENSIVE POSITIONS, EVERY-ONE! KARNAK IS GOING TO TRY THE DOOR!

THEY'RE STILL BREATH-ING, THANK QUELIN!

I DON'T MEAN TO BE A WISENHEIMER, KARNY, BUT WHY DON'T WE TRY THIS BUTTON FIRST?

NO, WAIT-- I SENSE--!

KARNAK'S WARNING COMES TOO LATE--!

YIIII!

BVOOM

SHE-HULK--?

KARNAK, ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?

YES. YOUR EMERALD ALLY TOOK THE BRUNT OF THE BLAST!

REED--JENNY MUST'VE BEEN BLOWN ALL THE WAY ACROSS THE CORRIDOR AND THROUGH THIS WALL! I'M GOING AFTER HER!

OH MAN--SHE-HULK WAS REALLY SENT FLYING. THAT CRUMMY SKRULL MUST HAVE HAD THAT DOOR BOOBY-TRAPPED!

OH, REED--IS EVEN SHE-HULK STRONG ENOUGH TO SURVIVE SUCH AN IMPACT?

I DON'T KNOW, SUE, I CAN--WAIT! THAT WHINING SOUND--WHAT--?

<ALIEN MISCREANTS--YOU ARE DISRUPTING THE ULTIMATE RESOLUTION OF THE IMPERIAL WAR!>

A MAN IN ARMOR, SPEAKING SOME ALIEN TONGUE--!

ANY ONE OF THESE BEINGS MAY BE MY ENEMY IN DISGUISE. I MUST TAKE NO CHANCES--DESTROY THEM ALL!

SUE--YOUR FORCE-FIELD--QUICKLY!

I'LL TRY TO HOLD HIM--UNTIL SUE CAN ATTACK. HMMM, I RECOGNIZE THAT BATTLE-HELMET--THIS IS A KREE SOLDIER. BUT WHAT IS HE DOING HERE?

NO SKRULL I HAVE SEEN CAN PLY HIS BODY LIKE THIS! THIS MUST BE ONE OF THE EARTH MUTATES!

=AAAGK=

<LET US SEE YOU SLITHER YOUR WAY OUT OF MY PROSTHETIC PINCER, EARTHWORM!>

WHILE, A FEW CHAMBERS AWAY...

JENNY! HEY PARTNER, YOU OKAY?

UNNNH. I THINK SO, JOHNNY. I'M NOT SURE I'LL BE UP TO PLAYING *PINOCHLE* FOR A WHILE, THOUGH.

HEY, TAKE IT EASY-- DON'T PUSH YOUR-SELF SO FAST.

BOY, THAT'S THE SECOND LAME MOVE I'VE MADE TODAY. I-- JOHNNY? THIS WALL-- *FEEL IT!*

HEY--IT'S GETTING WARM. *REAL WARM.*

THAT CRACK ABOVE US-- ISN'T THAT WHERE--?

FWOOSH

JENNY! GET BEHIND ME! QUICK!

JOHNNY--!?!

I'M ABLE TO INVERT MY FLAME-POWER--ABSORB FIRE FROM ALMOST ANY SOURCE!

I-I JUST HOPE I CAN SUCK IN THE WHOLE BLAST AT ONCE--!

YOU DID IT, SPORT! YOU DID IT!

STAY-- STAY BACK! THE FIRE... IS ALL INSIDE ME...

MAY HAVE TO... LET IT GO... AT ANY TIME--!

AND FIVE WALLS AWAY...

<BAH! I HAVE NO TIME TO WASTE WITH OUT-SIDERS! IT IS THE SKRULL WHO IS MY ONLY ADVERSARY!>

SUE-- LOOK OUT!

I AM THE LAST OF US LEFT STANDING. I HAVE MENTALLY PROBED THE STRESS POINTS OF OUR OPPONENT'S ARMOR LONG ENOUGH!

NOW SHALL KARNAK STRIKE THE SHATTERING BLOW!

EEAAA!

<EH?>

HE-HE PIERCED MY ARMOR. BUT THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE. MY ALL-TERRAIN SURVIVAL SUIT CAN WITH-STAND THE FORCE OF A METEORITE!

<DAMAGER! YOU SHALL DIE FOR THAT!>

HE AIMS. I MUST TIME THIS TO THE SPLIT-SECOND.

BUT EVEN AS KARNAK BEGINS HIS EVASIVE MANEUVER--!

LOOK OUT!

FWOOSH

I WAS HOPING I COULD PUT THAT EXCESS ENERGY TO GOOD USE! GUESS I SLAGGED THAT ROBOT BUT GOOD!

CUT THE FLAMES, JOHNNY. THAT WAS A KREE SOLDIER IN ARMOR, NOT A ROBOT!

OH, NO-- THERE'S NOTHING LEFT OF--!

NEGATIVE, JOHNNY. SEE THAT ACCESS-PLATE THERE? HE HAD HIS ESCAPE ROUTES PLANNED. ANY NUMBER OF THEM.

DO YOU WANT ME TO FOLLOW HIM, REED?

NO, SON, WE HAD BEST GATHER UP OUR WOUNDED AND GO BACK TO THE SURFACE. THIS WHOLE SUB-CITY COULD BE HONEY-COMBED WITH BOOBY-TRAPS FOR US AND ESCAPE ROUTES FOR THEM.

THERE APPEARS TO BE A LOT GOING ON DOWN HERE WE DON'T YET UNDERSTAND.

A HALF HOUR LATER, IN ATTILAN'S PARLIAMENT CITADEL, AN EMERGENCY COUNCIL OF WAR IS CONVENED...

THANK HEAVENS NONE OF US WAS SERIOUSLY INJURED.

HOW IS IT THAT TWO LONE WARRIORS COULD GIVE ALL ELEVEN OF US SUCH A HARD TIME, REED?

WELL, JOHNNY-- THEY BOTH MUST BE HIGHLY TRAINED WARRIORS, PERHAPS THE FINEST THEIR RESPECTIVE RACES HAVE TO OFFER.

LET'S TAKE THE WHOLE SITUATION FROM THE TOP. TWO SOLDIERS, A SKRULL AND A KREE, ARE BATTLING ONE ANOTHER IN THE DEPTHS OF ATTILAN, PRESUMABLY MOTIVATED BY THEIR ANCIENT ENMITIES.

HOW THEY GOT THERE, WE DON'T KNOW. WHY THEY ARE HERE ON THE MOON AS OPPOSED TO ANYWHERE ELSE, WE DON'T KNOW EITHER. WE ARE NOT EVEN CERTAIN THERE ARE BUT TWO OF THEM. WE DO KNOW, HOWEVER, THAT THEIR WARFARE AND SABOTAGE HAS BEEN UNDERMINING THE FOUNDATION OF ATTILAN. ALREADY THEY'VE CAUSED THE COLLAPSE OF ONE OF YOUR MAJOR STREETS AND RUPTURED SEVERAL POWER-MAINS, CAUSING GEYSERS OF FLAME TO ERUPT THROUGHOUT THE CITY.

IT'S OBVIOUS WE CANNOT LET THEIR BATTLE RUN ITS COURSE. UNTOLD DAMAGE AND CASUALTIES COULD RESULT. IF THEY REACH THE MAIN NUCLEAR PLANT, THEY COULD CONCEIVABLY DESTROY ALL ATTILAN.

ANY-ONE HAVE ANYTHING TO ADD?

ALL I HAVE TO SAY IS CONSIDERING THE ROUGH TIME THAT THOSE JOKERS GAVE US SEPARATELY, I'D HATE TO THINK WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF THEY DECIDED TO JOIN FORCES!

I DON'T THINK THEY'LL BE TOO INCLINED TO-- HMM, THAT GIVES ME AN IDEA.

ELSEWHERE IN THE BLUE AREA OF THE MOON STANDS A STRUCTURE AS UNLIKE THE RUINS IN WHICH IT IS NESTLED AS IT IS THE SPIRES OF NEARBY ATTILAN. IT IS THE FORBIDDING HOME OF THE **WATCHER.**

RARE IS THE VISITOR TO THE OMNISCIENT ALIEN'S ABODE...

...RARER STILL IS THE VISITOR WHO IS GRANTED AN AUDIENCE WITH THE WATCHER HIMSELF.

TWO SUCH VISITORS COME CALLING A SHORT TIME LATER...

--AND SO WE HAVE SURMISED THAT SOME SORT OF RITUAL COMBAT IS GOING ON.

ALTHOUGH I AM BOUND BY MY CODE OF NON-INTERVENTION TO NOT TAKE PART IN THE AFFAIRS OF THE BEINGS I OBSERVE, I AM PERMITTED TO TELL YOU YOUR SURMISAL IS CORRECT, REED RICHARDS.

THE OUTCOME OF THEIR CONTEST WILL HAVE COSMIC SIGNIFICANCE.

THEN, FRIEND WATCHER, LET ME TELL YOU THE PLAN BLACK BOLT AND I HAVE DEVISED.

AND AS THE LEADER OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR OUTLINES THEIR STRATAGEM, THE WAR BETWEEN KREE AND SKRULL CONTINUES IN THE CATACOMBS BENEATH ATTILAN, ESCALATING IN MIGHT, ALL THE WHILE EDGING CLOSER TOWARDS ATTILAN'S NUCLEAR POWER PLANT ...

HASTILY ASSEMBLED BATTALIONS OF INHUMANS ARE SENT INTO THE WAR ZONE --

--ONLY TO SUSTAIN HEAVY CASUALTIES.

BUT THEIR EFFORTS ARE NOT IN VAIN...

...FOR THEY HAVE SUCCEEDED IN DRIVING THE TWO COMBATANTS INTO CLOSE PROXIMITY OF ATTILAN'S FOREMOST FIGHTING FORCE...

COME ON, KREEP! SURRENDER! IT'S ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE WE NAIL YOU!

CURSE THEM! THESE EARTH-MUTATES MAY RUIN EVERYTHING! PAMA GRANT ME STRENGTH TO PREVAIL!

GAAAH! I HAD HOPED TO BURROW TO SAFETY AS A KALLUSIAN ROOT-DIGGER, BUT I AM SUDDENLY THROWN FROM MY TUNNEL!

NICE STOMP, GORGON --I ALMOST THOUGHT HE GOT AWAY!

I MUST REPAY HIM FOR THE INDIGNITY OF SHOOTING ME IN THE BACK AT OUR EARLIER ENCOUNTER.

YOU'LL HAVE TO WAIT YOUR TURN, GORG-- BLACK BOLT WANTS FIRST CRACK AT HIM!

A TUNNEL AWAY...

GOOD GOING, SUE! NOW TO GET HIM EVEN MORE DISORIENTED... MEDUSA, IF YOU PLEASE!

STANDING BY, REED!

EEEAGH! I AM BEING SPUN ABOUT SO FAST, I CANNOT FIGHT! IS THERE NO END TO THESE EARTH-MAGGOTS' ABILITIES?

BON VOYAGE!

AND...

THAT LAST BLOW-- HURT. I CAN BARELY STAND. MY HEAD IS SO SHAKEN I CANNOT CONCENTRATE ENOUGH TO CHANGE SHAPE!

THE INTERLOPERS AMASS ABOUT ME. OH, GREAT R'KLLL, I HAVE FAILED YOU! I DON'T HAVE THE STRENGTH TO --

KRRNGSH

UNNH!

WHAT--?

BEL-DANN--!

RAKSOR--!

IT IS HOPELESS, BEL-DANN. THEY HAVE SURROUNDED US. WE COULD NEVER--

"WE," RAKSOR? "*WE?*" YES, TOGETHER WE MIGHT ESCAPE THESE OUTSIDERS. ESCAPE TO CONTINUE OUR BATTLE IN PEACE.

SKEEX PRESERVE ME, THERE IS NO OTHER WAY. NEVER IN ALL MY DAYS DID I EVER THINK I WOULD FIGHT ALONGSIDE A--*KREE!*

SAVE YOUR BREATH FOR THE ENEMY, RAKSOR! THEY ARE ALMOST AS FORMIDABLE AS YOU!

FROM THE KREE'S LAST REMAINING WEAPON, CRIMSON ENERGY SOUNDLESSLY ERUPTS, CUTTING DOWN TWO OF THE ELEVEN DEFENDERS OF ATTILAN THAT SURROUND HIM!

HIS STRENGTH RENEWED BY DESPERATION, THE SKRULL CHARGES FEROCIOUSLY, MOWING DOWN YET ANOTHER TWO OF THE TIGHTENING CIRCLE OF ENEMIES.

WITH A FURY UNMATCHED IN THE COURSE OF THEIR MONTHS OF CONSTANT WARFARE, THE KREE AND THE SKRULL FIGHT ON, MAKING EVERY SAVAGE MOVE COUNT.

CURIOUSLY, THEIR OPPONENTS, WHO WERE SO SUCCESSFUL IN HERDING THEM INTO THE SAME VICINITY, NOW FAIL TO PUT UP MORE THAN TOKEN RESISTENCE AGAINST THE ALIENS' ONSLAUGHT.

ONE BY ONE, THE HEROES FALL...

...AND HAVING FALLEN, DO NOT STIR.

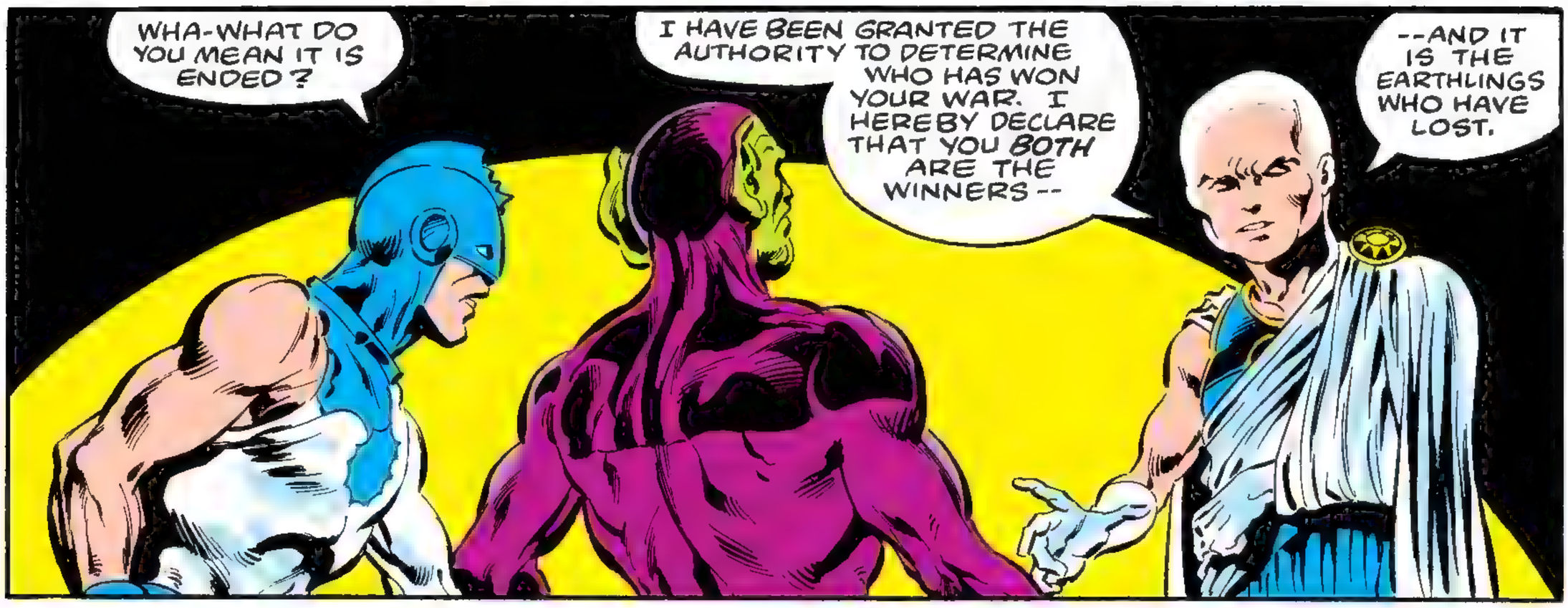
AT LAST, INCREDIBLY, IMPROBABLY--ONLY THE SKRULL AND THE KREE REMAIN STANDING.

BEL-DANN--WE--WE DID IT. WE VANQUISHED THEM ALL!

WE HAVE PROVEN ONCE AND FOR ALL THE SUPERIOR MIGHT OF OUR RACES OVER THESE BACKWATER BARBARIANS FROM EARTH!

AND NOW WE CAN--

HOLD, MAN OF THE KREE AND MAN OF THE SKRULLS! BY THE POWER VESTED IN ME BY YOUR EMPIRES, I DECLARE THIS COMBAT ENDED!


WHA-WHAT DO YOU MEAN IT IS ENDED?
I HAVE BEEN GRANTED THE AUTHORITY TO DETERMINE WHO HAS WON YOUR WAR. I HEREBY DECLARE THAT YOU BOTH ARE THE WINNERS --
--AND IT IS THE EARTHLINGS WHO HAVE LOST.

THE ULTIMATE SOLUTION TO YOUR EONS-OLD CONFLICT LIES ONLY IN YOUR COOPERATION. YOU HAVE PROVEN THAT THIS DAY.
CAN--CAN HE BE RIGHT?
WATCHERS CANNOT LIE, RAKSOR.

THUS ENDS THE KREE-SKRULL WAR! RETURN TO YOUR RESPECTIVE GALAXIES AND RELAY WHAT HAS TRANSPIRED. SO SPEAKS THE WATCHER!

THEY ARE GONE, REED RICHARDS. YOU AND YOUR ALLIES CAN RISE NOW.
LOOKS LIKE YOUR PLAN PAID OFF, RICHARDS. WE'RE RID OF THEM.
THE PLAN WOULDN'T HAVE WORKED IF EVERYONE HAD NOT MET THEIR DEFEAT SO CONVINCINGLY.
IF SUE HADN'T PROTECTED US WITH HER FORCE FIELDS, WE MIGHT HAVE BEEN A BIT TOO CONVINCING!

I CONGRATULATE YOU HUMAN BEINGS ON YOUR RESOURCEFULNESS. IT WOULD NEVER OCCUR TO THE KREE OR THE SKRULLS THAT A RACE WOULD PURPOSELY ACCEPT DEFEAT FOR THE SAKE OF THE GREATER UNIVERSE.

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, AS THE CITY LIGHTS DIM TO SIMULATE NIGHTFALL, THE LIGHTS IN THE PLEASURE DOME OF THE ROYAL PALACE GLEAM FESTIVELY...

THEN THERE WERE NO CASUALTIES TODAY-- NOT IN THE QUAKE OR IN THE BATTLE?

NO, THANK AURAN-- NOT A ONE.

THEN WE HAVE EVEN GREATER REASON TO REJOICE, MY FRIENDS!

HERE'S TO YOU TWO NEWLYWEDS-- TO YOUR WONDROUS PEOPLE-- AND TO PEACE AND PROSPERITY!

AMEN.

THANK YOU, REED.

I COULD SEND FOR LUNA'S NANNY, CRYSTAL-- IF YOU WOULD CARE TO DANCE.

GET DOWN, SHE-HULK!

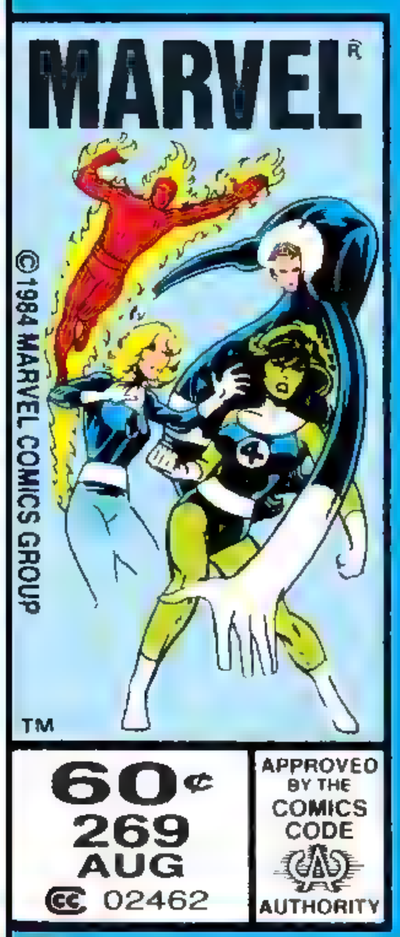
I'D LOVE TO, PIETRO!

YOU SURE YOU'VE ONLY DANCED ONCE BEFORE, GORGON? YOU DIP DIVINELY!

WHOOOAH.

I'M NOT SO SURE I'M FOND OF THIS WOMAN ANYMORE.

THE END.



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THE WORLD'S GREATEST COMIC MAGAZINE!

Fantastic Four

WHO IS *TERMINUS?*

Stan Lee PRESENTS:

SKYFALL

THE GREAT WESTERN DESERT OF THESE UNITED STATES. A LONE MAN PAUSES ON A JAGGED FINGER OF ROCK, CLAWING OUT OF THE OCEANS OF WINDBLOWN SANDS.

HIS NAME IS **WYATT WINGFOOT**, AND TODAY HE PREPARES TO FACE HIS DESTINY.

THE TIME HAS COME. THE LAST SECONDS OF MY OLD EXISTENCE TICK QUIETLY AWAY.

SO! LET ME FILL THESE MOMENTS WITH THE FULL FRUIT OF *LIFE!*

BY DAY'S END I MUST SET ASIDE FOREVER THE WAYS OF YOUTH, AND PLANT MY FEET FIRMLY ON THE PATH FATE SO LONG AGO MARKED OUT FOR ME.

MY GRANDFATHER, ***SILENT FOX,*** HAS BEEN DEAD NOW A FULL SEVEN MOONS, AND WITH MY FATHER LONG DEAD THE HEADDRESS OF THE CHIEF MUST NOW PASS TO ME...

...AND WITH IT, ALL THE MYRIAD RESPONSIBILI-TIES OF A LEADER.

YET, HOW CAN I COMPLAIN? I AM NOT YET *THIRTY,* AND I HAVE SEEN THINGS SUCH AS THE MEMBERS OF MY TRIBE SCARCELY EVEN *DREAM!*

I HAVE WALKED WITH THE ***FANTASTIC FOUR,*** AND WITH THEM I HAVE CROSSED AND RECROSSED THE ENDLESS WONDERS OF SPACE AND TIME.

HOW VERY LONG AGO IT ALL SEEMS NOW, YET IN TRUTH HOW SHORT A SPAN OF TIME IT REALLY IS.

I WISH I COULD INVITE THEM TO MY INVESTITURE, BUT THE CEREMONY IS ONLY FOR...

WAIT...

WHAT IN THE NAME OF...?!?

IT'S... SOME KIND OF GIGANTIC *ENERGY BEAM*, BLASTING DOWN FROM *SPACE!*

BUT... HOW FAR AWAY IS IT? IT LOOKS TO BE ON THE *HORIZON*, BUT THAT WOULD MAKE IT...

BUT WYATT WINGFOOT'S THOUGHTS DWINDLE TO NOTHING BEFORE THE SHEER MAGNITUDE OF THE CONCEPT THEY SEEK TO GRASP.

IT CANNOT BE!

THE BEAM MUST BE HALF A MILE WIDE! IT SLICES THROUGH ROCK AND EARTH AS IF THEY WERE NOT EVEN THERE!

WHO... WHAT COULD HAVE FIRED SUCH A THING AT THE EARTH? AND *WHY??*

UNHEEDING, UNCARING, THE INCREDIBLE BLADE OF POWER CONTINUES, CLEAVING A VAST SCAR AS FAR AS THE OPPOSITE HORIZON.

IT SEEMED AS IF IT WAS RIGHT ON TOP OF ME, YET IT PASSED A GOOD *MILE* AWAY! HOW CAN ANYTHING...

WAIT. AGAIN THE BEAM IS SLOWING DOWN...

NO, NOT SLOWING. IT'S CHANGING DIRECTION.

IT WAS GOING ALMOST DUE NORTH, BUT NOW IT SEEMS TO BE ANGLING TOWARDS THE SOUTHEAST.

MY VEHICLE SEEMS AS UNDAMAGED AS I AM.

I MUST HURRY BACK TO THE VILLAGE!

THE ELDERS ARE BOUND TO HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY ON THIS MATTER. I ONLY HOPE THERE WILL BE SOME KERNEL OF INFORMATION TO BE EXTRACTED FROM THEIR WORDS.

SOMETIMES THE RICH HISTORY OF MY PEOPLE CAN HAVE A WAY OF MUDDYING THE CLEAR WATERS OF THE PRESENT WITH THE ANCIENT SOIL OF LEGENDS.

THIS CHASM MUST BE A THOUSAND FEET DEEP!

AND ANYTHING THAT COULD SO CASUALLY CAUSE THIS MUCH DAMAGE MUST BE FAR BEYOND THE DOMINION OF THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES.

IT IS TIME I SPOKE ONCE MORE WITH THE FANTASTIC FOUR!

AND, AS THAT PORTENTIOUS THOUGHT PASSES THROUGH THE MIND OF THE YOUNG CHIEF-TO-BE...

...TWO THOUSAND MILES ACROSS THIS GREAT LAND THE SIGHTS AND SCENTS OF SPRING BRING NEW COLOR TO THE TOWERS AND CANYONS OF MANHATTAN...

...WHERE, AT ONE OF THE MANY CAFES THAT LINE COLUMBUS AVENUE, TWO FRIENDS ARE RE-UNITED FOR THE FIRST TIME IN SEVERAL WEEKS.

I'M SO GLAD YOU AGREED TO MEET ME FOR LUNCH, JOHNNY. I WAS BEGINNING TO THINK YOU'D PUT ME ON YOUR "IGNORE AND AVOID" LIST. SO, WHAT'S NEW WITH THE ONE AND ONLY ***HUMAN TORCH***?

NOW THERE'S A QUESTION AND A HALF. I CAN'T EVEN ***BEGIN*** TO TELL HER EVERYTHING THAT'S HAPPENED, FROM THE ***SECRET WAR*** * OUT IN SPACE, AND ***BEN*** DECIDING NOT TO RETURN TO EARTH WITH THE REST OF US, TO ***REED*** AND ***SUE*** LOSING THEIR SECOND CHILD TEN DAYS AGO...

*SEE ***MARVEL SUPER HEROES: SECRET WARS,*** 12-PART SERIES, ON SALE NOW-- BOB.

OH, SAME OLD STUFF, ***SHARON.*** YOU KNOW HOW IT IS WITH US SUPER-FOLK. SAVING THE UNIVERSE A COUPLA TIMES A WEEK...

YOU HAVE MY SYMPATHIES, KIDDO. IT MUST BE SO...

ALICIA?

ER... 'SCUSE ME ME A MINUTE, WOULD YOU, SHAR?

SURE, BUT WHAT'S... OH, ISN'T THAT *ALICIA MASTERS*? THE *THING'S* GIRLFRIEND?

YEAH, AND FAMILY FRIEND OF THE REST OF THE FF. SHE LOOKS A BIT LOST...

ALICIA? HI. I THOUGHT IT WAS YOU. NEED A GUIDING HAND?

IS THAT YOU, JOHNNY? YES, I *DO* SEEM TO BE A BIT TURNED AROUND.

THE MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY IS GIVING A SPECIAL PRESENTATION OF AMERIND SCULPTURE, SO I THOUGHT I MIGHT DROP BY.

BUT I SEEM TO HAVE MISSED THE CORNER...?

NOT BY MUCH, THOUGH. THE MUSEUM'S JUST ACROSS THE STREET.

SHE SEEMS SO... VULNERABLE. I'D ALWAYS THOUGHT OF ALICIA AS BEING COMPLETELY SELF-SUFFICIENT, DESPITE HER BLINDNESS, BUT...

LISTEN, I'M NOT DOING ANYTHING THIS MORNING. HOW ABOUT LETTING ME ESCORT YOU?

WHY, THANK YOU, JOHNNY. THAT'S MOST KIND.

LOOKS LIKE I'LL HAVE TO TAKE A RAINCHECK ON LUNCH, SHARON.

CATCH YOU LATER, OKAY?

ER... AH... YEH, SURE JOHNNY...

NOW, WHAT THE HECK IS ALL THAT ABOUT? *JOHNNY STORM* AND *ALICIA MASTERS*? I WONDER WHAT THE THING HAS TO SAY ABOUT THAT?

ALTHOUGH, COME TO THINK OF IT, I DON'T BELIEVE ANY-ONE'S EVEN *SEEN* THE THING FOR A COUPLE OF WEEKS...?*

*FOR MORE ON THE WHEREABOUTS OF BEN GRIMM DON'T MISS CURRENT ISSUES OF *THE THING*--BOB.

MEANWHILE...

A FEW BLOCKS CROSS-TOWN THE **BAXTER BUILDING** HAS LONG SINCE BEEN ECLIPSED AS ONE OF NEW YORK'S TALLEST SKYSCRAPERS, YET IT IS STILL THE MOST FAMOUS OF THE CITY'S TOWERS...

...FOR IT IS THE **HEADQUARTERS** OF THE FABULOUS **FANTASTIC FOUR.**

AND, HERE, IN ONE OF THE MANY LUXURIOUS CHAMBERS ON THE RESIDENTIAL LEVEL, A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN SITS ALONE WITH HER SORROWS

SHE IS **SUSAN STORM RICHARDS**, MORE POPULARLY KNOWN AS THE **INVISIBLE GIRL**, AND SHE HAS RECENTLY FELT THE INDISCRIMINATE TOUCH OF **TRAGEDY.**

IT HARDLY SEEMS ***FAIR.*** WE'VE TRAVELED ACROSS THE ***UNIVERSE,*** FACED TERRORS BEYOND HUMAN COMPREHENSION, ONLY TO BE STRUCK BY THIS ***SENSELESS*** LOSS.

THE LIFE OF AN INNOCENT, UNBORN CHILD SNUFFED OUT-- WIPED OFF THE FACE OF THE UNIVERSE AS IF IT NEVER WAS.

MY CHILD.

AND NOW, JUST TO ADD INSULT TO INJURY, DR. LANSING, MY PHYSICIAN, SAYS IT WOULD BE UNWISE FOR ***REED*** AND ME TO ATTEMPT TO HAVE ANY MORE CHILDREN.

REED THOUGHT THE PROBLEM WITH THIS LAST PREGNANCY WAS DUE TO THE CHILD HAVING BEEN CONCEIVED IN THE ***NEGATIVE ZONE;**** THAT STRANGE REGION OF HYPER-SPACE, BUT LANSING SAYS NO.

HE SAYS IT'S BECAUSE OF THE RADIA-TION IN OUR CELL STRUCTURE, THE VERY THING THAT GIVES US OUR FANTASTIC POWERS AND NEARLY COST US OUR FIRST-BORN, ***FRANKLIN.***

*ISSUES 251 THRU 256. HOPE YOU CAUGHT 'EM--BOB.

SPEAKING OF WHOM...

HELLO, SPORT. YOU LOOK ALL EXCITED.

UNCA JOHNNY JUST CALLED, MOMMY. HE SAID TO TELL YOU HE CAN'T COME OVER FOR DINNER TONIGHT, DOES THAT MEAN WE CAN GO BACK TO C'NET'CUT NOW?

WELL, AT LEAST THAT'S ONE MAJOR CONCERN THAT HASN'T COME TO FRUITION. WHEN WE RECENTLY DECIDED TO ADOPT "SECRET IDENTITIES" TO TRY TO GIVE FRANKLIN A SEMBLANCE OF NORMAL CHILDHOOD I WAS CONCERNED HE'D HAVE TROUBLE ADAPTING, BUT...

YOU SURE LOVE IT OUT THERE, DON'T YOU, HONEY? WELL, WE'LL BE HEADING... HOME JUST AS SOON AS DADDY FINISHES HIS WORK HERE. DO YOU KNOW WHERE HE IS?

HE AN' THE *SHE-HULK* WENT UP TO THE AS...TRO... PHYSICS LAB, *MOMMY*.

I LIKE SHE-HULK. IS SHE GONNA STAY WITH US AFTER UNCA BEN COMES BACK?

I... DON'T REALLY KNOW, FRANKLIN. I'M NOT ABSOLUTELY SURE WHY BEN DIDN'T RETURN WITH DADDY AND JOHNNY.

BUT, ANYWAY, YOU SCOOT OFF AND PACK YOUR STUFF, AND WE'LL BE BACK IN *BELLE PORTE* BY DINNER-TIME.

OKAY, MOMMY! SEE YOU LATER!

AND, A FEW MINUTES LATER ON THE FOURTH FLOOR OF THE BAXTER BUILDING'S TOWER...

THINGS CERTAINLY HAVE BEEN CHANGING FOR THE FF LATELY.

BUT THEN OUR LIVES HAVEN'T BEEN EXACTLY *CONSTANT* SINCE WE WERE BOMBARDED BY THOSE *COSMIC RAYS*, YEARS AGO.

I THINK I MUST HAVE TOLD HIM A HUNDRED TIMES THAT I WAS GOING TO MARRY HIM. THE FACT HE WAS A COLLEGE SENIOR DIDN'T PHASE ME IN THE LEAST. IF I COULD JUST WHISPER IN THE EAR OF THAT LITTLE GIRL RIGHT NOW.

TO THINK HOW YOUNG I WAS WHEN I FIRST MET REED. WHAT AN EMBARRASSMENT I MUST HAVE BEEN FOR HIM!

I WONDER IF SHE'D... I'D... EVEN BELIEVE ONE WORD OF IT?

MORNING, TROOPS. HOW GOES THE MARCH OF SCIENCE?

CAREFUL, SHE-HULK. THAT ADAMANTIUM CORE MODULE IS... OH, HELLO, DARLING.

AFTERNOON, MRS. RICHARDS. HOW ARE YOU FEELING TODAY?

OH, I AM WELL, THANK YOU SHE-HULK. BUT I *DO* WISH YOU'D GET INTO THE HABIT OF CALLING ME *SUE*. WE'RE PARTNERS NOW, AFTER ALL.

TRUE ENOUGH. BUT I GUESS YOU'D BETTER CALL ME *JEN*, THEN.

ALTHOUGH NOT IN PUBLIC. *JENNIFER WALTERS* STILL NEEDS HER SECRET IDENTITY.

SOMETHING WITH WHICH WE ARE ALL BECOMING MORE AND MORE FAMILIAR.

NOW, SUE, YOU'RE JUST IN TIME TO SEE THE FINAL PHASE OF THIS EXPERIMENT. BUT, YOU'LL NEED THESE POLARIZING GOGGLES.

YOU KNOW, I'M NOT EVEN SURE WHAT IT IS YOU'VE BEEN DOING IN HERE.

I'VE BEEN ATTEMPTING TO HARNESS A VERY ANCIENT AND PRIMAL UNIVERSAL POWER SOURCE, HONEY.

BUT ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS. JUST KEEP AN EYE ON THIS TENNIS BALL AFTER I POSITION IT IN THE SUSPENSION FIELD.

*WITH EXACTING CARE THE MAN CALLED **MISTER FANTASTIC** ADJUSTS THE FLOATING SPHERE.*

THEN, A SMALL CONTACT IS PRESSED...

...A LOW HUM FILLS THE CHAMBER...

...AND...!

THEN...

WOW!

REED, WHAT IN THE WORLD..?

DON'T WORRY. THAT'S JUST KINETIC ENERGY BEING DISCHARGED AS LIGHT--COMPLETELY HARMLESS.

AFTER THE BRILLIANT FLARE HAS PASSED...

THE SAD REMNANTS OF THE TENNIS BALL BOB FORLORNLY IN THE SUSPENSION FIELD.

...AND THE KEENLY ANALYTICAL MIND OF REED RICHARDS IS ALREADY SORTING THE COLLECTED DATA.

PERFECT. I KNEW AN *IMPLOSION* WAS ONE OF THE POSSIBLE RESULTS OF THIS TEST. THE SENSORS REVEAL THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT HAPPENED.

BUT... REED, WHY DID THE BALL IMPLODE? WHAT DID YOU JUST DO?

WELL, I'LL TRY TO EXPLAIN IT IN LAYMAN'S TERMS, HONEY.

WHAT YOU JUST SAW WAS AN *AVERAGING* OF THE RELATIVE VELOCITIES OF TWO OBJECTS. IN THIS CASE, THE TENNIS BALL...

...AND *THE SUN!*

"YOU RECALL A FEW MONTHS AGO I LAUNCHED A SMALL SATELLITE INTO A HELIOCENTRIC ORBIT, THAT IS, AN ORBIT AROUND THE SUN.

"WELL, THAT SATELLITE HAS A ***SUB-SPACE*** LINK TO THE EQUIPMENT IN THIS LAB, AND A MOMENT AGO THAT LINK TOOK THE SPEED OF THE SUN THROUGH SPACE, AND BY MEANS OF SPECIAL BEAMERS, AVERAGED IT WITH THE SPEED OF THE TENNIS BALL.

"THE SURFACE ATOMS OF THE BALL ACQUIRED AN INSTANT VELOCITY OF NEARLY HALF THE SPEED OF THE SUN THROUGH SPACE."

IN OTHER WORDS, IF WE TAKE THE SPEED OF THE SUN AS, OH, *ONE THOUSAND UNITS*, AND THE SPEED OF THE BALL AS *ONE UNIT*, THE OUTER ATOMS OF THE BALL WERE SUDDENLY RUSHING INWARDS AT *FIVE HUNDRED UNITS*, AND SO, NATURALLY, THE BALL IMPLODED, *CRUSHED* BY ITS OWN SKIN.

UH-HUH. WELL, AS BEN WOULD NO DOUBT SAY, IF THAT'S THE LAYMAN'S VERSION, I'D HATE TO HEAR THE SCIENTIST'S!

YES, WELL, IN ANY CASE, I'M ATTEMPTING TO HARNESS THE POTENTIAL POWER HERE AS A SOURCE OF MOTIVE ENERGY. IMAGINE VEHICLES CAPABLE OF SUCH DRAMATIC, INSTANT SPEED, WITH NO DEPLETABLE FUEL, AND NO POLLUTION.

UNFORTUNATELY FOR THE MOMENT I AM ABLE TO CREATE ONLY A *SURFACE EFFECT*. AND, UNLESS THE ACCELERATION WAS UNIFORM THROUGHOUT THE ATOMIC STRUCTURE...

ANY PASSENGERS WOULD BE SPLATTERED ALL OVER THE BACK OF YOUR VEHICLE LIKE RASPBERRY JAM. THAT MUCH I CAN UNDERSTAND.

I WAS HOPING IT WAS SOMETHING MORE THAN A WAY TO SQUASH TENNIS BALLS.

WELL, OF COURSE.

BY NOW YOU REALIZE THAT ANYTHING I DO, EVEN THE MOST TRIVIAL EXPERIMENT, IS GEARED TOWARDS THE COMMON...

OH, EXCUSE ME A MOMENT, MY DARLING...

DRINNNNNGGG!!

FANTASTIC FOUR, REED RICHARDS SPEAKING. WHO? *WYATT?* WELL, HELLO, BIG FELLA! IT'S BEEN A LONG...

WHAT?!? HOW LARGE A BEAM?

GREAT SCOTT, MAN! HOW LONG AGO DID THIS HAPPEN?

REED, WHAT IS IT? WHAT'S WRONG?

BUT BEFORE ANY REPLY CAN BE MADE...

REED! SUE! LOOK!

LIKE THE ACCUSING FINGER OF SOME OUTRAGED PAGAN GOD THE RUBY BEAM SCORES ACROSS THE HILLS OF NEW JERSEY, SMASHES ACROSS THE PALISADES...

...THEN, MERE INCHES BEFORE IT WOULD STRIKE THE PROUD TOWERS OF MANHATTAN, SUDDENLY SWERVES SOUTHWARDS AGAIN.

THE BROWN WATERS OF THE HUDSON RIVER SEEM TO TURN TO BOILING BLOOD, ALMOST AS IF THEY WERE BURNING BENEATH THE HELLISH LIGHT.

MANHATTAN IS SPARED!

THE BEAM ITSELF CONTINUES ONLY ANOTHER HUNDRED YARDS OR SO, BEFORE IT FLICKERS, GHOST-LIKE...

...AND IS NO MORE.

AND, BACK AT THE BAXTER BUILDING...

YES WYATT, IT LOOKED LIKE THE SAME BEAM.

IT MUST HAVE SCRIBED A PATH ACROSS THE WHOLE COUNTRY!

IT LOOKED AS IF IT DIMINISHED CONSIDERABLY FROM ITS INITIAL IMPACT. I WONDER IF...

BUT, BEFORE MISTER FANTASTIC CAN CONTINUE...

BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP

THE WHITE HOUSE HOT LINE!

RICHARDS HERE, MR. *PRESIDENT!*

REED, WHAT IN BLAZES IS GOING ON? WE'RE GETTING EMERGENCY CALLS FROM ALL OVER THE COUNTRY. SOMETHING ABOUT A *DEATH RAY...?!?*

QUICKLY REED RICHARDS BRIEFS THE MAN WHO HOLDS THE LONELIEST OFFICE ON EARTH...

12.

CUTTING IN FOR A MOMENT IF I MAY, MR. PRESIDENT. PROF. RICHARDS, I'M *CLEMENT STANDGROUND*, THE PRESIDENT'S NEW SCIENTIFIC ADVISOR.

WE'VE GOT THE *LANDSAT* SATELLITE SCANNING THE PATH OF THE BEAM NOW. LUCKILY IT'S PRETTY MUCH CLOUDLESS OVER MOST OF THE COUNTRY TODAY.

EXCELLENT. IF YOU COULD TRANSMIT THOSE PICTURES TO ME AS SOON AS THEY'RE PROCESSED...

IN THE MEANTIME I'VE ALREADY BEEN IN CONTACT WITH SOMEONE NEAR THE ORIGINAL IMPACT SITE. THE SHE-HULK AND I WILL HEAD OUT THERE IMMEDIATELY TO INVESTIGATE.

RICHARDS OUT.

SHE-HULK? WAIT A MINUTE, REED. LET ME GET INTO MY UNIFORM, AND I'LL COME WITH YOU TOO!

NO, HONEY, NOT THIS TIME. YOU'RE STILL NOT FULLY RECOVERED FROM YOUR MISCARRIAGE. PLUS, SOMEONE MUST STAY WITH FRANKLIN.

YOU CAN FUNCTION BEST AS OUR EAST-COAST LIAISON. USE THE FLARE SIGNAL TO SUMMON THE TORCH. TELL HIM TO HOLD THE FORT AT THIS END.

BUT... BUT REED, YOU MAY NEED ME, MY POWERS...

WE'LL JUST HAVE TO TAKE THAT CHANCE, DARLING. I WON'T RISK YOU PUTTING YOURSELF IN DANGER UNTIL I'M SURE YOU'RE SUFFICIENTLY RECOVERED.

NOW, PLEASE JUST DO AS I ASK. COME ON, SHE-HULK. TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE.

IT'S HAPPEN-ING AGAIN!

I'M BEING SHUFFLED ONTO THE SIDELINES, JUST LIKE AFTER FRANKLIN WAS BORN.

IT ISN'T FAIR. IT JUST ISN'T! I LOVE REED, AND I UNDERSTAND HIS POINT OF VIEW...

BUT IT'S FRUSTRATING. EVEN AFTER ALL THESE YEARS HE STILL TREATS ME LIKE SOME DELICATE CHINA DOLL THAT WILL BREAK IF ANYONE SO MUCH AS BREATHES ON IT.

WELL, HE'S ***WRONG!*** I'M NOT A DOLL. I'M EVERY BIT AS IMPORTANT A PART OF THIS TEAM AS REED, OR JOHNNY, OR BEN...OR SHE-HULK. I WON'T BE PUSHED INTO THE BACKGROUND AGAIN.

I WON'T!!

LIKE THE SHOCKWAVE OF A GREAT EXPLOSION, HER INVISIBLE FORCE-FIELD ERUPTS FROM HER IRRADIATED CELLS.

AND ALL THAT STANDS BEFORE IT IS SWEPT AWAY LIKE DRY LEAVES BEFORE A HURRICANE.

MEANWHILE, ALREADY AT TRANSONIC SPEED, ONE OF THE FASTEST AIRCRAFT LICENSED FOR CIVILIAN USE SCREAMS THROUGH THE THIN AIR HIGH OVER THE EASTERN STATES.

SCANNERS OPERATIONAL, REED.

VERY GOOD, SHE-HULK. I'VE SET THEM TO MEASURE THE CHANGING ANGLE OF THE TRENCHES SCORED BY THE ENERGY BEAM AS IT CROSSED THE COUNTRY. WE MAY BE ABLE TO ESTIMATE FROM THAT JUST HOW FAR OUT IN SPACE THE BEAM ORIGINATED.

IF YOU SAY SO.

I'M JUST A ONE-TIME *LADY LAWYER*. THIS HARD SCIENCE STUFF IS BEYOND ME.

DON'T UNDERESTIMATE YOURSELF, SHE-HULK. THE INTRICACIES OF THE LAW HAVE ALWAYS BEEN LIKE ANOTHER LANGUAGE TO ME.

IF YOU WERE ABLE TO MASTER THEM THEN YOU MAY FIND SCIENCE NOT AS DIFFICULT AS YOU THINK.

BE THAT AS IT MAY, SHE-HULK, WHAT INTRIGUES *ME* NOW IS THE WAY THE BEAM ZIG-ZAGGED ACROSS THE COUNTRY. COULD THERE HAVE BEEN SOME LOGIC, SOME *PATTERN*, I WONDER?

STARTING TO GET SOME FIGURES ON MY SCREENS, REED.

THAT WILL BE THE FIRST ROUGH DISTANCE TRI-ANGULATION. PIPE IT THROUGH TO MY SCREEN.

GOOD GRIEF! IF THESE FIGURES ARE ACCURATE THE BEAM ORIGINATED *ONE HUNDRED LIGHT YEARS AWAY!*

BUT ITS APPARENT VELOCITY WAS ONLY THE *SPEED OF LIGHT.*

"THAT MEANS THE BEAM WAS TRAVELING THROUGH SPACE FOR *ONE HUNDRED YEARS!*

"WHOEVER FIRED IT WAS ABLE TO CALCULATE NOT ONLY THE POSITION OF THE EARTH BY THE TIME THE BEAM REACHED IT, BUT ALSO THAT THERE WOULD BE A SUFFICIENT *LAND MASS* FACING THE BEAM!

"NOT ONLY THAT, BUT THEY WOULD HAVE NEEDED TO TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION ALL THE POSSIBLE *OBSTRUCTIONS*, OTHER PLANETS, STARS, GRAVITY FIELDS... INCLUDING OUR OWN SUN, SINCE THE BEAM STRUCK ON THE DAYLIGHT FACE OF THE PLANET!"

WHOEVER THEY ARE, TO HAVE CALCULATED SO MANY VARIABLES OVER SUCH ENORMOUS DISTANCE, THEY MUST REPRESENT AN INTELLECTUAL LEVEL MILLIONS OF YEARS BEYOND OUR OWN.

I SUPPOSE IT WOULD BE TOO MUCH TO HOPE FOR THEM TO BE FRIENDLY, REED?

WELL, THE DESTRUCTIVE POWER OR THE BEAM DOES TEND TO PRECLUDE...

GREAT SCOTT!

OMIGOSH!

LOOK OUT!

REED! WHAT IS THAT THING?

IT MUST BE A VESSEL, A SPACE-CRAFT OF SOME KIND. LOOK, IT'S CHANGING COURSE!

BUT IT'S STILL DESCENDING MUCH TOO FAST. UNLESS THE PILOT BRAKES THE DESCENT SOON IT'S BOUND TO...

KRAKOOM!

WITHIN MINUTES...

WOW! WHOEVER WAS FLYING THAT THING SURE CAME A LONG WAY FOR NOTHING!

THERE'S NO WAY ANYONE COULD HAVE SURVIVED A CRASH LIKE THAT.

I WOULDN'T BE TOO SURE OF THAT, SHE-HULK.

MY PORTABLE SENSOR CAN DETECT NO KNOWN LIFE-FORMS INSIDE THE SHIP, BUT THAT MEANS NOTHING.

IF THIS SHIP REPRESENTS THE SAME TECHNOLOGY THAT FIRED THE ENERGY BEAM WE MUST BE PREPARED FOR THE *UNEXPECTED!*

LOOK! YOU CAN SEE THE FINER DETAILS OF THE SUPERSTRUCTURE BECOMING MORE CLEAR AS THE WHOLE SHIP COOLS!

YES. CURIOUS, THOUGH, FROM THIS ANGLE AT LEAST I SEE NOTHING LIKE A HATCH OR AIR-LOCK.

I WONDER IF THAT ISN'T...

REED!

WYATT! GOOD TO SEE YOU AGAIN.

YOU, TOO, SIR. I JUST WISH IT WERE UNDER LESS FORBODING CIRCUMSTANCES.

I TAKE IT THIS LARGE LADY IS THE SHE-HULK?

AH, YES. I SUPPOSE SOME SORT OF INTRODUCTIONS ARE IN ORDER...

NOT AT MY END, REED. I READ ABOUT THE SHE-HULK TAKING MR. GRIMM'S PLACE IN *NEWSWEEK*. PLEASED TO MEET YOU, MA'AM.

LIKEWISE. I'VE ALSO READ ABOUT YOU, WYATT. I HOPE MY TENURE WITH THE FF WILL BE AT LEAST HALF AS INTERESTING AS YOURS WAS.

GOOD. NOW THAT THAT'S TAKEN CARE OF, WYATT, I'D LIKE TO GET SOME MORE DETAILED FIRST-HAND OBSERVATIONS OF THE INITIAL IMPACT OF THE BEAM.

YOU SAID IT SEEMED AT LEAST HALF A MILE WIDE?

...AT...

....LAST....

AND, OBLIVIOUS TO THIS DEVELOPMENT...

FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH, REED, THE ELDERS OF MY VILLAGE CLAIM TO HAVE BEEN UNSURPRISED BY THESE STRANGE EVENTS.

THEY SPEAK OF ANCIENT LEGENDS, WHICH TELL OF A GREAT EVIL TO COME, AN EVIL OF INCREDIBLE POWER AND AGE.

AN INDESTRUCTIBLE EVIL, DESTINED TO FALL FROM THE SKY.

4

HMM. I'M A SCIENTIST, WYATT, BUT I'VE LEARNED FROM EXPERIENCE THAT MANY ANCIENT CULTURES SEEM PARTY TO KNOWLEDGE BEYOND THAT OF "CIVILIZED" MAN.

IN ANY CASE, I FEAR THERE *IS* AN ANCIENT EVIL AT WORK HERE, AND THE PILOT AND CREW OF THAT VESSEL MUST SURELY REPRESENT A FORMIDABLE FORCE.

BUT, WE SHOULD HAVE RECEIVED THE COMPUTER PROCESSED READ-OUTS FROM THE *LANDSAT* SCAN BY NOW. LET'S HAVE A LOOK AT... *GOOD GRIEF!*

I WAS RIGHT!

THERE WAS A LOGICAL PATTERN TO THE MOVEMENT OF THE BEAM! THAT IS CLEARLY *WRITING!* *ALIEN WRITING!*

ALIEN WRITING? HUNH! BUT, THAT DOESN'T HELP US MUCH, DOES IT? WE STILL DON'T KNOW WHAT IT *SAYS*...

BUT WE WILL, SHE-HULK, AND IN JUST A FEW MINUTES.

I'LL SIMPLY PROGRAM THAT IMAGE THROUGH OUR *UNIVERSAL TRANSLATOR*...

A SCANT THREE MINUTES TICK QUICKLY BY, AS THE INGENIOUS PRODUCT OF REED RICHARDS' UNSURPASSED INTELLECT TURNS ITS MECHANICAL MIND TO DECODING THE ALIEN HIEROGLYPHS.

THEN...

HERE IT COMES...

HMM.

I CLAIM THIS WORLD·TERMINUS

AS WE SUSPECTED, THIS IS IN NO WAY THE PRECURSOR OF A FRIENDLY VISIT.

NOT EXACTLY, NO.

BUT... WHO THE HECK IS *TERMINUS*?

I AM, SLAVE!!

I AM TERMINUS. I AM MASTER OF THIS PLANET!!

...UH OH...

THIS ISSUE BROUGHT TO YOU BY: JOHN BYRNE WRITER/ARTIST | GLYNIS WEIN COLORIST | DIANA ALBERS LETTERER | BOB BUDIANSKY EDITOR | JIM SHOOTER EDITOR IN CHIEF | SPECIAL THANKS TO LARRY NIVEN SCIENCE ADVISOR

NEXT ISSUE: AN IMMORTAL, INDESTRUCTIBLE FOE! THE STORY WE HAD TO CALL... **PLANET-FALL!** DON'T MISS IT!

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STAN LEE PRESENTS: THE GREATEST THREAT THE FF HAVE EVER FACED!

PLANET-FALL

NEW YORK, NEW YORK. VOICES ECHO IN A LARGE, ALMOST UNFURNISHED LOFT APARTMENT SOUTH OF CENTRAL PARK.

SO THIS IS YOUR NEW PLACE, JOHNNY? BEN TOLD ME YOU'D DECIDED TO MOVE OUT OF THE BAXTER BUILDING, INTO YOUR OWN... AH... PAD. BUT IT SOUNDS A BIT EMPTY.

IT PRETTY MUCH IS, ALICIA. I'VE HAD BUILDERS IN TO FINISH THE WALLS AND FLOOR AND DIVIDE THE AREA UP INTO ROOMS AND SUCH, BUT... WELL, SO FAR I HAVEN'T BEEN ABLE TO FIND A FURNITURE STYLE I LIKE.

JOHNNY STORM'S WORDS SOUND MORE HOLLOW TO HIMSELF THAN EVEN THE SPARSENESS OF THE FURNITURE CAN ACCOUNT FOR. THERE IS A SUBLIMINAL TENSION IN THE ROOM FOR WHICH HE CAN FIND NO LOGICAL REASON.

JOHN BYRNE WRITER/ARTIST / GLYNIS WEIN COLORIST / MICHAEL HIGGINS LETTERER / BOB BUDIANSKY EDITOR IN TRANSIT / JIM SHOOTER EDITOR IN CHIEF

EVER SINCE WE LOST OUR PARENTS, SUE'S BEEN PRETTY CLOSE TO A MOTHER FOR ME, MAKING ALL THE IMPORTANT DECISIONS, ALL THE MINOR DECISIONS. AND I GUESS I WAS JUST LAZY ENOUGH TO *LET* HER.

IT'S FUNNY, BUT SINCE I'VE MOVED OUT ON MY OWN I'VE DISCOVERED HOW REALLY DEPENDANT I'D BECOME ON MY SISTER, SUE, TO MAKE THOSE DECISIONS FOR ME.

HERE'S YOUR TEA. CAREFUL, IT'S *HOT*.

THANK YOU, JOHNNY.

I WOULDN'T BE TOO HARD ON MYSELF IF I WERE YOU, THOUGH, JOHNNY. I KNOW ONLY TOO WELL HOW EASY IT IS TO BECOME DEPENDANT ON OTHERS.

MY STEPFATHER ALWAYS BLAMED HIMSELF FOR MY *BLINDNESS*. HE TRIED TO HIDE HIS FEELINGS, TRIED TO KEEP ME AT ARMS LENGTH, BUT HE ENCLOSED ME IN A COCOON, A PERMANENT BUFFER AGAINST THE OUTSIDE WORLD.

YOU KNOW, BEFORE HE TRIED TO *ATTACK* THE FANTASTIC FOUR, AND USED ME TO GAIN ACCESS TO YOUR HEADQUARTERS*, IT HAD BEEN NEARLY THREE YEARS SINCE I'D EVEN BEEN OUTSIDE OUR APARTMENT.

AND THEN... THEN I MET BEN. POOR, SWEET, TORTURED BEN, FOREVER TRAPPED IN THE BODY OF A MONSTER, A *THING*.

I WAS ONLY NINETEEN WHEN WE FIRST MET, BUT I SENSED SOMETHING, SOMETHING BEYOND THE ROUGH HIDE, THE GRUFFNESS. I SENSED A TENDER, LOVING SOUL.

AND, NOW BEN IS GONE, OFF ON THE STRANGE, ALIEN PLANET WE ALL GOT KIDNAPED AWAY TO.

*IT ALL HAPPENED WAY, WAY BACK IN *FF* #9!! --Bob.

ER... SORRY. FOOT-IN-MOUTH DISEASE, I KNOW YOU MUST STILL FEEL...

NO, JOHNNY, IT'S ALL RIGHT.

I UNDERSTAND WHY BEN CHOSE NOT TO RETURN TO EARTH. EVEN BEFORE YOU WERE ALL TAKEN*, HE HAD SPOKEN OF GOING OFF ON HIS OWN, OF TRYING TO COME TO TERMS WITH SOME OF THE THINGS THAT HAD BEEN HAPPENING TO HIM... TO US.

*SEE *MARVEL SUPER HEROES: SECRET WARS*, ON SALE NOW-- B.

BEN AND I HAVE LOVED EACH OTHER ALMOST FROM THAT MOMENT OF OUR FIRST MEETING, JOHNNY. BUT, OF LATE OUR FEELINGS FOR EACH OTHER HAVE BEEN CHANGING. WE'VE BOTH BEEN AWARE OF THE CHANGE-- SEVERAL TIMES IN RECENT MONTHS I'VE FELT BEN DISTANCING HIMSELF--BUT NEITHER OF US HAS BEEN ABLE--OR WILLING--TO PUT A NAME TO THE CHANGE.

BEN HAS MORE THAN ONCE EXPRESSED HIS CONCERN FOR ME THE DANGER I WILL ALWAYS BE IN SO LONG AS I AM "ALICIA MASTERS, THE THING'S GIRLFRIEND".

"HIS CONCERN WAS CRYSTALLIZED WHEN THE EVIL *ANNIHILUS* ESCAPED FROM THE *NEGATIVE ZONE*. HE INTENDED TO DESTROY THE EARTH, AND I WAS NEARLY HIS FIRST VICTIM.*

*IN A SEQUENCE THAT RAN IN FF#'s 251 THRU 256 -- Bob again.

"I SURVIVED, OF COURSE. BUT JUST BARELY.

"ANNIHILUS WRECKED ONE ENTIRE FLOOR OF THE BAXTER BUILDING WITH HIS ASSAULT, AND I WAS RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF IT."

I SUFFERED MULTIPLE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL INJURIES. I WAS IN THE HOSPITAL NEARLY FIVE MONTHS...

...AS WAS YOUR NEPHEW, FRANKLIN, ALSO ATTACKED BY ANNIHILUS, WE BOTH HAD TO UNDERGO EXTENSIVE SURGERY.

THEY EVEN NEEDED TO SHAVE MY HEAD, LEAVING ME, I'M TOLD, LOOKING LIKE A PUNK ROCKER.

WELL... I DON'T KNOW... MYSELF, I KINDA *LIKE* YOUR HAIR LIKE THAT. IT MAKES YOU LOOK... YOUNGER. I GUESS WITH YOU BEING BEN'S GIRL-FRIEND I'D COME TO THINK OF YOU AS MUCH MORE THAN A COUPLE OF YEARS OLDER THAN ME.

YOU'RE VERY SWEET, JOHNNY. YOU DO WONDERS FOR A GIRL'S EGO. BUT, IN A WAY, YOU'VE PUT YOUR FINGER ON PART OF THE PROBLEM.

BUT, TAKE MY WORD FOR IT, FROM OVER HERE YOU LOOK *GREAT.*

EVERYONE HAS COME TO SEE BEN AND I AS IF WE WERE SOMEHOW... I DON'T KNOW... *MARRIED,* AT LEAST IN EVERY WAY SHORT OF THE ACTUAL CEREMONY.

BUT, WE'RE NOT. NOT IN ANY SENSE OF THE WORD. WE WERE TWO PEOPLE WHO WERE DRAWN TO EACH OTHER BY MUTUAL NEEDS, MUTUAL DEPENDENCIES...

...AND SOMEHOW I THINK WE'VE EACH TURNED A CORNER IN OUR LIVES. THINGS BETWEEN US ARE... DIFFERENT.

BEN AND I STILL LOVE EACH OTHER. WE ALWAYS WILL. BUT SOMEHOW I THINK WE'VE BOTH COME TO THE REALIZATION THAT...

OH MY GOODNESS! IS THAT REALLY THE TIME? I HAVE AN INTERVIEW WITH *ARTS NEWS* IN HALF AN HOUR. I MUST GET BACK TO MY STUDIO.

THANKS FOR THE TEA AND SYMPATHY, JOHNNY. IT WAS GOOD TO TALK TO SOMEONE... ESPECIALLY A DEAR FRIEND.

MY DOOR IS ALWAYS OPEN, ALICIA. ALWAYS.

CAN I CALL YOU A CAB?

NO, THANK YOU - I CAN FIND MY WAY HOME -- IT'S ONLY A FEW BLOCKS.

THANK YOU, JOHNNY... FOR EVERYTHING.

THE GRUMBLE OF THE ELEVATOR GROWS DISTANT AS IT CARRIES THE BLIND SCULPTRESS TO THE STREET.

JOHNNY STORM FEELS STRANGELY ALONE AND EMPTY.

THEN...

ALICIA'S CAP! SHE FORGOT IT!

HIS INTENTION IS TO CHASE AFTER HER, BUT AS HE TAKES THE CAP FROM ITS PEG FOR AN INSTANT A WHIFF OF PERFUME FLOATS BY HIM.

HER PERFUME.

AND THE THOUGHT DRIFTS THROUGH HIS MIND THAT SHE MIGHT NOT HAVE FORGOTTEN IT. THAT SHE MIGHT HAVE LEFT IT **DELIBERATELY**, AS AN EXCUSE TO RETURN LATER.

HIS HEAD IS SWIMMING AS HE OPERATES THE LEVER THAT OPENS HIS SKYLIGHT.

PHANTOM THOUGHTS DART AND SOAR THROUGH HIS CONSIOUSNESS, IMAGES THAT DEFY WORDS, AND DEEPLY TROUBLE HIM.

FLAME ON!

CONFUSED, HE SEEKS THE FAMILIAR SENSATIONS OF HIS POWER.

BUT IT IS LITTLE SOLACE, FOR THE **HUMAN TORCH** HAS AT LAST IDENTIFIED THE TENSION HE FELT EARLIER IN **ALICIA MASTERS'** PRESENCE.

SINCE HE TURNED SIXTEEN JOHNNY HAS SPENT A GREAT PROPORTION OF HIS LIFE IN FRUITLESS SEARCH FOR THE PERFECT WOMAN. AN UNENDING STREAM OF FAILED RELATIONSHIPS HAS BEEN HIS REWARD.

AND NOW HE IS CONFUSED AND NOT A LITTLE FRIGHTENED BY THE DAWNING REALIZATION THAT IN ALL THESE YEARS HE MAY HAVE FAILED TO FIND HIS PERFECT WOMAN BECAUSE SHE WAS STANDING TOO CLOSE...

THE TORCH'S FLIGHT TAKES HIM PAST, BUT NOT INTO ONE OF NEW YORK'S MOST FAMOUS TOWERS...

...THE BAXTER BUILDING, HEADQUARTERS OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR!

WHERE...

MOMMY!

MOMMY!

YOUNG FRANKLIN RICHARDS, JOHNNY'S NEPHEW, RACES THROUGH THE ECHOING HALLS OF THE FOURTH LEVEL OF THE BUILDING'S SUMMIT STRUCTURE.

MOMMY!

I HEARD A BIG KA-BOOM. WHAT HAPPENED?

...MOMMY?

FRANKLIN?

OH, FRANKLIN! C'MERE, BABY. MOMMY NEEDS A BIG ***HUG*** IN THE WORST WAY!

WHAT'S WRONG, MOMMY? HOW COME DADDY'S LAB'TORY GOT ALL BLOWED UP? DID YOU GET 'TACKED BY A ***BAD GUY***?

NO. NO, HONEY. IT'S JUST... DADDY AND SHE-HULK WENT OFF ON A MISSION AND... DADDY WOULDN'T LET ME GO WITH THEM. HE SAID I HAD TO STAY HERE WITH YOU... AND I JUST GOT... ***MAD.***

D-DON'T YOU ***WANT*** TO STAY HERE WITH ME, MOMMY?

WHAT? ***OH!*** OF COURSE I DO, DARLING! DON'T EVER THINK THAT! I LOVE YOU, I LOVE YOU MORE THAN ALL THE WORLD.

IT'S JUST THAT IT'S SO FRUSTRATING FOR ME TO BE SHUFFLED ONTO THE SIDELINES AGAIN. IT'S JUST...

...WHAT...?

WHAT DO I SAY? HOW DO I EXPLAIN TO A FIVE YEAR OLD... EVEN ONE AS BRIGHT AS FRANKLIN... HOW I FEEL RIGHT NOW? HOW... HOW STYMIED... HOW ANGRY.

HOW ***GUILTY!***

YES, THAT'S THE BIG THING, ISN'T IT? I WANTED TO GO WITH REED AND SHE-HULK TO GET MY MIND OFF HOW I FEEL ABOUT LOSING OUR BABY, ABOUT MY MISCARRIAGE.

"MISCARRIAGE." EVEN THE WORD ITSELF IS A CONDEMNATION, AN ACCUSATION OF WRONGDOING, I'D NEVER EVEN THOUGHT OF THAT BEFORE, OF HOW A SIMPLE WORD CAN CARRY SO MUCH EMOTIONAL POWER.

I KNOW LOSING THE BABY WASN'T IN ANY WAY MY *FAULT*, BUT THAT DOESN'T HELP THE WAY I'M FEELING RIGHT NOW. SOME PEOPLE HAVE SAID MY FORCE-FIELDS MAKE ME THE MOST POWERFUL MEMBER OF THE FF...

HONEY, MOMMY HAS TO TRY AND GET IN TOUCH WITH UNCLE JOHNNY, SO YOU RUN ALONG AND FINISH YOUR PACKING NOW, OKAY?

OKAY, MOMMY. SEE YOU.

...THE MOST POWERFUL MEMBER. BUT A LOT OF GOOD MY POWERS DID ME... OR ANY OF OUR POWERS.

WE'VE FOUGHT EVILS SUCH AS MANKIND HAS NEVER DREAMED, BUT WE COULD NOT WIN THIS TIME. WE COULD NOT SAVE AN UNBORN CHILD.

AND NOW WHAT DO I DO WITH MY POWER? I WASTE IT ON A FOOLISH TEMPER TANTRUM.

I *DEMOLISH* THIS WHOLE ROOM, SMASH MILLIONS OF DOLLARS WORTH OF SCIENTIFIC EQUIPMENT.

AND WHY? BECAUSE I FEEL FRUSTRATED? BECAUSE I'M RESENTFUL AT BEING RELEGATED TO THE ROLE OF BEING "JUST A WOMAN" AGAIN.

I LIVED UNDER THAT SHADOW, THE SHADOW OF REED AND JOHNNY--AND BEN-- FOR SO LONG. AND NOW, JUST WHEN IT SEEMED AS IF I WAS GOING TO BE ABLE TO PUT THAT ALL BEHIND ME, ONCE AND FOREVER...

ENOUGH! IF THIS *IS* GOING TO HAPPEN AGAIN, IF I AM GOING TO LOSE MY STANDING IN THE FANTASTIC FOUR I'LL HAVE MORE THAN ENOUGH TIME FOR MOURNING.

RIGHT NOW, I HAVE BUSINESS TO ATTEND TO.

THE TINY FLARE-GUN SPITS A SINGLE, SHINING PELLET.

THE FLARE SLICES A CLEAN, BRIGHT ARC ACROSS THE MID-MORNING SKY...

...AND AT THE HEIGHT OF THE CURVE A FAMILIAR SIGNAL EXPLODES OVER NEW YORK.

BUT THE TORCH, STILL PERPLEXED BY RECENT DEVELOPMENTS.

...IS TOO FAR AWAY TO SEE OR RESPOND,

MEANWHILE...

THE WEATHER IS ALREADY BEGINNING TO THICKEN TOWARDS ANOTHER SWELTERING SUMMER IN **HOUSTON**. SLOW AND SULLEN BREEZES DO LITTLE TO DISPEL THE HEAT, MASSING LIKE AN INVADING ARMY ABOUT THE CITY.

BUT HERE, JUST ON THE OUTSKIRTS, THERE IS COOL...

...OF A KIND, AT LEAST. THE ARTIFICIAL COOL OF HIDDEN AIR-CONDITIONERS.

BUT ALSO, ANOTHER KIND OF HEAT...

HURRY, SIR.

FOR THIS IS ONE OF THE MANY DATA RECEIVING STATIONS OF THE **LANDSAT** PROJECT, AND TODAY THERE BRISTLES THROUGH THIS NORMALLY STAID GROUP OF GEOLOGISTS AND GEOGRAPHERS A WAVE OF EXCITEMENT MORE COMMONLY ASSOCIATED WITH A SPACE-LAUNCH.

IN HERE, SIR.

YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO TALK ME THROUGH THIS, WILBERFORCE. THE PRESIDENT WANTS A FULL REPORT, BUT I'M NOT EVEN SURE ON ***WHAT!***

OF COURSE, SENATOR.

I REALIZE YOUR PLANE WAS DIVERTED WHILE *EN ROUTE* TO L.A. WE HAVE A FULL SCALE ***EMERGENCY*** ON OUR HANDS.

FORTY-SEVEN MINUTES AGO ***SOMETHING*** CAME SCREAMING DOWN FROM SPACE AND CRASHED JUST THERE IN SECTOR A-T-3B-4.

WE'VE BEEN USING ALL THE EARTH-SCANNING FACILITIES OF THE LANDSAT SATELLITE TO GET DATA ON THE IMPACT.

AS NEAR AS WE CAN TELL SOMETHING THAT CAN ONLY HAVE BEEN AN ***ALIEN SPACECRAFT*** CRASHED INSIDE THAT RED ZONE, AND SINCE THEN WE'VE BEEN MONITORING WIDE-RANGING DESTRUCTION IN THAT REGION. I HATE TO STATE THE OBVIOUS, BUT IT LOOKS ***SERIOUS,*** SENATOR.

MORE THAN YOU MIGHT IMAGINE, WILBERFORCE.

THE PRESIDENT GOT IN TOUCH WITH ***REED RICHARDS***, AND ASKED HIM TO INVESTIGATE A ***BEAM*** THAT STRUCK THIS COUNTRY FROM DEEP SPACE ABOUT THREE HOURS AGO.

RICHARDS AGREED TO ASSIST.

THAT MEANS MEMBERS OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR ARE OUT THERE RIGHT NOW...

"SMACK DAB IN THE MIDDLE OF *THAT!*"

THE CRATER IS NEARLY A MILE ACROSS.

AN HOUR AGO THIS WAS DESERT-- ROLLING DUNES AND CRAGS, AND DEEP-DELVING CACTI.

NOW IT IS A **WAR ZONE!**

AND FOR AT LEAST **ONE** *OF THE COMBATANTS, IT IS THE FIRST EXPOSURE TO A FORCE OF SUCH TRULY* **COSMIC** *DIMENSIONS.*

I... DON'T... BELIEVE... IT...

ALL HE DID WAS WAVE THAT FANCY PIG-STICKER OF HIS, AND...

REED?

REED?! WYATT?!

OVER HERE, *SHE-HULK.*

YOU GUYS ALL RIGHT?

RELATIVELY UNSCATHED. I THINK. I WAS ABLE TO SPREAD MY ELASTIC BODY AS A PARTIAL SHIELD AGAINST THE BLAST AND ATTENDANT DEBRIS.

WYATT--?

MY TRIBESMEN AND I ARE... SHAKEN, BUT OTHERWISE OKAY, REED.

BUT... WHO ON EARTH WAS THAT MONSTER WHO ATTACKED US?

NO ONE OF THIS EARTH. ***TERMINUS*** HE CALLED HIMSELF, AND THE NAME SEEMS APPROPRIATE ENOUGH. HIS POWER MAY NEARLY RIVAL THAT OF ***GALACTUS*** HIMSELF!

I ***PRAY*** NOT, REED. BUT WHERE HAS HE GONE? SURELY ONE SO BIG...?

*AS IF IN ANSWER TO **WYATT WINGFOOT**'s QUERY...*

THERE!

THAT SURE LOOKS LIKE THE SAME KIND OF BLAST HE HIT US WITH!

AND, A MILE OR SO ACROSS THE DESERT, TERROR ROLLS ACROSS WYATT'S PEOPLE LIKE A GREAT, DROWNING **OCEAN.**

THESE ARE AN INTELLIGENT PEOPLE, WELL VERSED IN THE INTRICATE TECHNOLOGIES OF MODERN MAN...

...BUT NOTHING THEY HAVE EVER EXPERIENCED COULD HAVE PREPARED THEM FOR **TERMINUS!!**

WHAT A PUNY, RIDICULOUS PLANET THIS IS! SEE HOW ITS DOMINANT LIFE-FORM FLEES BEFORE MY POWER.

THIS WORLD HAD BEST BE RICH IN NATURAL RESOURCES, FOR ITS PEOPLE WILL MAKE VERY POOR **SLAVES.**

DID I TRAVEL A HUNDRED LIGHT YEARS FOR SUCH PITIFUL PLUNDER?

WELL? DID I?!?!

GREAT ONE...PLEASE...

YOU WERE SO KEEN TO LEAVE ARIANIS MAJOR...IN SUCH A GREAT RUSH TO GET ON TO THE NEXT WORLD...

YOU GAVE ME INSUFFICIENT TIME TO ESTIMATE THE PRECISE NATURE OF...

WORDS! WORDS WORDS WORDS! TERMINUS HAS NO TIME FOR WORDS, NO TIME FOR EXCUSES. TERMINUS HAS TIME ONLY FOR WEALTH, FOR LOOT AND POWER!

YOU HAVE FAILED ME, SLAVE!

GREAT ONE! NO! NO!

AND THERE IS BUT ONE PENALTY FOR FAILURE...

NOOO

AND ABRUPTLY TERMINATED...

THEN...

LET NO MORE TIME BE WASTED! TERMINUS HAS CROSSED THE GREAT GULF IN SEARCH OF SPOILS!

LET TERMINUS NOW BE SATISFIED!

FROM THE CRACKLING TIP OF HIS LANCE A BEAM OF INDESCRIBABLE DESTRUCTION COURSES...

AND, LIKE THE LAYERS OF AN ONION BENEATH THE BLADE OF A MASTER CHEF, THE SKIN OF THE PLANET PEELS AWAY...

...AND THE EARTH SCREAMS!!

BEHOLD THE AGONY OF A WORLD!

FORCES UNKNOWN ON EARTH FOR BILLIONS OF YEARS PIPE AND TEAR THROUGH THE PLANET'S CRUST, A MAELSTROM OF CARNAGE RIPPLES OUT FROM TERMINUS.

IT IS LIKE SOME TERRIBLE BLENDING OF BIRTH AND DEATH, TORMENT UNIMAGINABLE, THE PHYSICAL ANGUISH NOT OF MAN OR WOMAN BUT OF ROCK AND SOIL.

LIKE A BIRTH OF UNSPEAKABLE, BURNING PAIN...

LIKE A DEATH BY SLOW AND INSIDIOUS TORTURE...

THE AIR ITSELF CRIES OUT AS MOLTEN ROCK SWIRLS THROUGH IT.

AND, AT THE CENTER, ORCHESTRA LEADER TO THIS SYMPHONY OF DESTRUCTION, VAST AND IMPLACABLE STANDS...

...TERMINUS!!

TWO MILES DISTANT...

IT'S... *INCREDIBLE!* THE FORCES HE'S UNLEASHING... I CAN BARELY STAND BEING THIS *CLOSE!*

IT'S A... *CRACKING STATION!* HE'S BREAKING DOWN THE PLANET'S MASS INTO ITS COMPONENT ELEMENTS.

IS IT... IS IT POSSIBLE THAT'S *ALL* HE IS? A *SCAVENGER?* A PILLAGER? YET... HOW *OBSCENE* THAT ONE WITH SUCH POWER SHOULD HAVE SUCH PITIFUL MOTIVATIONS...

NEVER MIND THE PHILOSOPHICAL ASPECTS, REED. HOW CAN HE BE *STOPPED?*

BUT, BEFORE THE MAN CALLED **MISTER FANTASTIC** CAN EVEN BEGIN TO FRAME AN ANSWER...

UUURRR...

WHAT...?

IT'S THAT LITTLE ALIEN! HE'S STILL ALIVE!

AND NOT SO LITTLE, EITHER. WE WERE GAUGING HIS SIZE AGAINST TERMINUS.

ALIENS... QUICKLY, I HAVE NOT MUCH TIME.

EASY, OLD FELLA. DON'T EXERT YOURSELF. WE MAY BE ABLE TO HELP YOU...

NO, BY THE TIME YOU COULD DEDUCE HOW TO KEEP ME ALIVE I SHALL BE DEAD. LISTEN TO ME. I **LIED** TO TERMINUS.

I KNEW FULL WELL THE NATURE OF THIS PLANET, FOR MANY CENTURIES THE FLOW OF COSMIC ENERGIES ABOUT THIS TINY WORLD HAVE MARKED ITS IMPORTANCE, SET IT APART IN ALL THE GALAXY.

WHEN TERMINUS CAME TO MY WORLD, TO STEAL ITS WEALTH, TO ENSLAVE ITS PEOPLE, HE TOOK ME AS HIS PERSONAL SLAVE. AT HOME I WAS CONSIDERED A GREAT SCIENTIST AND HE WANTED MY KNOWLEDGE TO GUIDE HIM, TO SEEK OUT ACROSS THE GULFS OF SPACE THE NEXT WORLDS FOR HIM TO PLUNDER.

HE HAS DESTROYED A THOUSAND OTHER WORLDS, AND NOWHERE HAS THERE BEEN ENOUGH POWER TO STAND AGAINST HIM.

UNTIL NOW. BY NOW YOUR WORLD MUST HAVE EVOLVED, MUST HAVE BROUGHT FORTH THE POWERS, THE BEINGS TO... TO...

HE'S GONE, AND HE HAS LEFT US WITH A GREAT TASK.

HE BELIEVED THAT EARTH ALONE WOULD HAVE A CHANCE TO STOP TERMINUS.

WE MUST NOT LET HIM DOWN, MUST NOT FAIL HIS TRUST.

I DON'T BELIEVE I'M HEARING THIS REED, YOU SOUND ALMOST... **GLAD** THIS **IDIOT** BROUGHT TERMINUS TO EARTH!

HOW ARE WE SUPPOSED TO STOP HIM?

HIT HIM WITH THE WHOLE PLANET?

HIT HIM WITH...?

HMM. NOW YOU MAY HAVE ACCIDENTALLY HIT THE NAIL RIGHT ON THE HEAD, SHE-HULK!

HUH? WHAT DID I SAY?

NO TIME FOR DETAILED EXPLANATIONS. THE POGO PLANE WAS WRECKED BY TERMINUS' FIRST ATTACK, BUT THERE SHOULD BE ENOUGH MATERIAL FOR A QUICK CONSTRUCTION JOB...

...AND THEN YOU MUST BE READY TO DO EVERYTHING I TELL YOU...

...INSTANTLY AND WITHOUT QUESTION!

MEANWHILE...

UNHEEDING, UNCARING TERMINUS CONTINUES HIS MARCH ACROSS THE STATE.

AS AROUND HIM CRAGS AND BUTTES THAT HAVE STOOD VIRTUALLY UNCHANGED FOR UNCOUNTED CENTURIES BOIL AWAY TO ATOMIC FIRE.

SLOWLY, THE DESERT YIELDS TO REGIONS OF GREATER POPULATION DENSITY...

HANOVER IS A CITY OF WELL OVER EIGHTY-FIVE THOUSAND PEOPLE.

AS THE COSMIC CYCLONE APPROACHES, IT BEGINS TO LOOK AS IF **NONE OF THEM** WILL SURVIVE THIS DAY!

AND, AS HE SURVEYS THE CITY, WITH ITS SWARMING, TERRIFIED POPULACE, SOMETHING STIRS DEEP WITHIN TERMINUS.

LIKE A BUBBLE DRIFTING UP TO BREAK THE GLASS-LIKE SURFACE OF A PLACID POND MEMORIES FLOAT UP, MEMORIES OF FAR AWAY AND LONG, LONG AGO...

...THE YELLOW JANTHA BLOSSOMS DRIFTING ON THE PURPLE BREEZE, THE SCENT OF ARCARA MINGLING WITH THE NEW FALLEN POOLS OF HARAN-ATHRA...

HATED MEMORIES.

AND THE BLACK, BILIOUS RAGE THAT SWIRLS BEHIND HIS BROW IS ENOUGH TO KEEP HIS ATTENTION AWAY FROM THE ACTIVITY BELOW...

CAREFUL NOW, SHE-HULK. DON'T ALLOW YOURSELF TO BE DISTRACTED BY THE CRACKING EFFECT. YOUR AIM MUST BE TRUE THE FIRST TIME.

THERE WILL BE NO SECOND CHANCE.

I'M READY. I JUST HOPE WHAT'S LEFT OF OUR PLANE DOESN'T BLOW UP *BEFORE* IT REACHES THE TARGET.

SO, HAPPY *BIRTHDAY*, MR. T! I HOPE YOU GET A REAL *BANG* OUT OF THIS!

HERS ARE AMONG THE STRONGEST MUSCLES ON EARTH. THEY COIL AND RELEASE WITH NIGH EXPLOSIVE FORCE, AND THE CRUDE MISSILE...

...FINDS ITS MARK!

IT WORKED! HE WASN'T HURT, BUT THE BLAST SURPRISED HIM INTO DROPPING HIS LANCE.

NOW IT'S MY TURN TO ACT QUICKLY.

HIS ELONGATED FORM NO MORE THAN A BLUR, THE LEADER OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR STRETCHES UP... UP...

"...AND..."

DID IT!

FOR AGONIZING SECONDS NOTHING SEEMS TO HAPPEN. THEN...

INSOLENT WORM! YOU *DARE* TOUCH THE PERSON OF...

...OF...

AND ON A NEARBY HILLSIDE...

LOOKS AS IF IT'S WORKING, REED!

BUT...

"WHAT'S WORKING?" ASKS WYATT WINGFOOT. "WHAT DID YOU DO?"

"MORE OR LESS WHAT SHE-HULK SUGGESTED," SAYS REED. "THE OBJECT I ATTACHED TO TERMINUS WAS A HASTILY BUILT MODEL OF AN ACCELERATION DEVICE I'VE BEEN WORKING ON."

*SHOWN IN DETAIL LAST ISSUE--Bob.

IT SENT HIM OFF AT AN INSTANT VELOCITY OF SOME TWENTY THOUSAND MILES PER HOUR, *AGAINST* THE DIRECTION OF THE EARTH THROUGH SPACE.

IT JUST... DROVE HIM INTO THE PLANET LIKE A TENT PEG!!

SO HE IS... DEFEATED? JUST LIKE THAT?

NO...HE'S NOT DEFEATED, WYATT. MERELY DELAYED. I DID NOT HAVE TIME, WHAT WITH THE WIDE-SCALE DESTRUCTION HE WAS CAUSING, TO COME UP WITH SOMETHING THAT COULD ACTUALLY ***STOP*** HIM. BUT THIS SENT HIM INTO THE EARTH'S ***CORE***, AND WITHOUT HIS LANCE IT WILL TAKE HIM ***MONTHS*** TO DIG HIS WAY OUT AGAIN.

AND BY THEN YOU'LL BE READY FOR... BUT, WHAT'S THAT VIBRATION?

SUBSIDENCE EFFECT! THE BORE HOLE IS ***COLLAPSING*** ON TOP OF TERMINUS!

SHE-HULK! GET WYATT OUT OF THE WAY!

WAY AHEAD OF YOU, REED! C'MON TALL, RED AND GORGEOUS...DON'T YOU GO BYE-BYES ON US JUST YET!

BENEATH THEIR SCRAMBLING FEET THE FIRM, SURE EARTH BECOMES A RIVER, A TORRENT FLOWING.

IT IS AS IF THEY SUDDENLY FIND THEMSELVES WITHIN THE TOP OF A GIANT HOURGLASS, WITH THE SANDS RUNNING OUT!

SHE-HULK'S POWERFUL LEGS CARRY THEM CLEAR, THE MOST PRESSING DANGER FALLING BEHIND THEM...

BUT THE TERRAIN IS STILL UNSURE...

WHOOPS!

SHE-HULK, LOOK OUUUUFFF!!

UM...ER... AH... EXCUSE ME, SHE-HULK, I DID NOT MEAN... AH...

HEY, MY PLEASURE, BIG FELLA. BUT... NEXT TIME LET'S FIND SOMETHING *SOFTER* TO LAND ON!

WELL, FOR THE MOMENT AT LEAST, THAT TAKES CARE OF... WYATT? SOMETHING WRONG? YOU STILL LOOK TROUBLED.

I *AM* DEEPLY TROUBLED, REED.

THIS WAS TO BE THE DAY OF MY INVESTITURE AS *CHIEF* OF MY TRIBE. NOW I AM NOT SO SURE I CAN ACCEPT THAT TITLE.

OR IF I EVEN *WANT* IT!

EPILOG.

THE WESTERING SUN PAINTS LONG SHADOWS ACROSS THE COOLING DESERT. TO THE EAST THE SKY BEGINS TO DARKEN, AS THE SOUL OF WYATT WINGFOOT HAS DARKENED.

HE HAS BEEN NEARLY **TEN HOURS** WITH THE COUNCIL OF ELDERS, TRYING WITH LITTLE SUCCESS TO EXPLAIN TO THEM HIS **DECISION**

WYATT?

I HAVE TOLD THEM, REED, I CANNOT SAY IF THEY TRULY UNDERSTAND, FOR THOUGH THEIR WISDOM IS GREAT IT DOES NOT EXTEND BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF OUR ANCIENT HUNTING GROUNDS. THEY HAVE NOT SEEN WHAT I HAVE SEEN, AND WHAT I LONG TO SEE AGAIN.

YOU'RE ***SURE*** THEN, WYATT? I'M PREPARED TO SUPPORT YOUR DECISION ***ONE HUNDRED PERCENT***, BUT YOU MUST BE CERTAIN.

NO, REED, I AM ***NOT*** CERTAIN, HOW COULD ANYONE BE CERTAIN OF SUCH A DECISION? BUT OF THIS I ***AM*** CERTAIN--SO LONG AS THEIR IS ANY DOUBT IN MY MIND, ANY LONGING FOR THE LIFE I ONCE KNEW IN THE WORLD OUTSIDE THIS VILLAGE...

...THEN I AM NOT FIT TO BE CHIEF!

HE'S QUITE A MAN! HARDLY MORE THAN A KID, BUT WITH WISDOM FAR PAST HIS YEARS.

THEN THE TIME HAS COME FOR US TO DEPART, WYATT. ***NEW YORK*** IS WAITING, AND YOU WILL ALWAYS HAVE A PLACE WITH US...

...WITH THE ***FANTASTIC FOUR!***

NEXT ISSUE! JOIN US AS WE BEGIN TO DELVE THE MYSTERIOUS ***PAST*** OF THE MAN CALLED ***MISTER FANTASTIC*** IN A TALE FROUGHT WITH SURPRISES...

WHO IS REED RICHARDS?

SOME OF THE ANSWERS ARE GUARANTEED TO SHOCK YOU!

BE HERE IN THIRTY DAYS!

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THE WORLD'S GREATEST COMIC MAGAZINE!

Fantastic FOUR®

HAPPY BIRTHDAY DARLING!

HAPPY BIRTHDAY REED

4½

STAN LEE PRESENTS: JOHN BYRNE WRITER/ARTIST • CHIANG & HIGGINS LETTERERS • GLYNIS WEIN COLORIST • MICHAEL CARLIN BRAND-NEW EDITOR • JIM SHOOTER ED. IN CHIEF

BIRTHDAY? MY GOODNESS! IT HAD COMPLETELY SLIPPED MY MIND!

HAPPY BIRTHDAY REED

THE **BAXTER BUILDING**, NEW YORK, NEW YORK. IN ONE OF THE MANY LABORATORIES THAT CROWD THE TOP FIVE STORIES OF THE MIDTOWN TOWER COMPLEX, THREE HUNDRED FEET ABOVE THE BUSTLE OF MADISON AVENUE, THE FRIENDS, FAMILY AND MEMBERS OF EARTH'S GREATEST SUPER-TEAM GATHER FOR A MOMENT OF TRANQUILITY IN THEIR OTHERWISE FRANTIC LIVES.

YES, MANY HAPPY RETURNS OF THE DAY, SIR.

HAPPY, HAPPY, *HAPPY* BIRTHDAY, MY DARLING. AND MANY, MANY MORE TO COME.

OKAY, BREAK IT UP, YOU LOVE-BIRDS. WE GOT US A *CAKE* TO *CUT*. THINK YOU CAN HANDLE BLOWING OUT ALL THOSE CANDLES, NOW YOU'VE HIT THE *BIG ONE*, BROTHER-IN-LAW?

I'M NOT AT ALL SURE, *JOHNNY*.

THAT'S AN IMPOSING ARRAY OF LUMINESCENCE, COULDN'T I BATTLE A SUPER VILLAIN OR TWO, JUST TO GET WARMED UP?

NOT TODAY, *REED*. I GOT ALL *DOLLED UP* FOR THIS, YOU'RE *STUCK!*

IF YOU SAY SO, *SHE-HULK*, I JUST HOPE I WON'T LET EVERYBODY DOWN.

DADDY! DADDY, I KNOW HOW YOU CAN DO IT! IT'S *EASY*, DADDY!

SO YOU'VE GOT IT ALL FIGURED OUT, EH, *FRANKLIN*?

MAYBE YOU'D BETTER WHISPER IT IN MY EAR, SON!

HMMMM...

WELL, IT'S NOT EXACTLY DIGNIFIED... BUT...

IF ONE CAN'T LET ONE'S HAIR DOWN ON ONE'S BIRTHDAY...

GO WAIT WITH MOMMY NOW, FRANKLIN.

AND WE'LL SEE IF THIS WILL WORK...

SLOWLY THE MAN CALLED *MISTER FANTASTIC* BEGINS TO DRAW IN HIS BREATH, DEEPER AND DEEPER...

AND AS HE DOES, THE AMAZING ELASTIC QUALITIES OF HIS IRRADIATED CELLS RESPOND...

...IN A MANNER MOST UNORTHODOX.

THEN...

WHOOOOOSH!

THAT WAS TERRIFIC, REED! LOOKS LIKE YOU GET YOUR WISH!

SHE-HULK! PLEASE!

BUT I THINK NOW I KNOW WHY THE *THING* SOMETIMES CALLS YOU AN OVERBLOWN WIND-BAG!

HMM. I'D ALMOST THINK THAT WAS *CHEATING* A LITTLE *ALICIA*...

...IF I HADN'T USED *MY* POWER TO *LIGHT* THOSE CANDLES!

THEN, AFTER A MODICUM OF CALM HAS RETURNED, AND THE IMPROMPTU PARTY HAS MOVED TO THE RESIDENTIAL LEVEL, THREE FLOORS BELOW...

WHAT'S WRONG, DARLING? YOU SEEM HAPPY ENOUGH TO BE CELEBRATING YOUR BIRTHDAY, BUT... I SENSE SOMETHING BOTHERING YOU.

AM I THAT OBVIOUS, SUE? I WAS HOPING I COULD BE MORE COVERT.

WELL, THE OTHERS MAY NOT HAVE NOTICED BUT THEY AREN'T *MARRIED* TO YOU. I'VE SHARED BED AND BOARD WITH YOU LONG ENOUGH TO KNOW WHEN YOU'RE TROUBLED.

OF COURSE, I SHOULD KNOW BY NOW I CAN HAVE NO SECRETS FROM YOU, MY DARLING.

LET'S STEP OUT ONTO THE BALCONY FOR A MOMENT AND TALK IN PRIVATE.

ALL RIGHT, BUT... REED, YOU'RE... OKAY, AREN'T YOU? YOU'RE NOT *SICK*, OR...

NO, NO, DON'T WORRY ON THAT COUNT, I'M PERFECTLY FIT...

...PHYSICALLY, AT LEAST. BUT, THERE'S SOMETHING ELSE.

SUSAN...

...I CAN'T REMEMBER MY MOTHER'S EYES.

YOUR MOTHER'S...? I'M NOT SURE I UNDER-STAND.

I'M NOT CERTAIN I DO EITHER, SWEETHEART. MY MOTHER DIED WHEN I WAS ONLY SEVEN YEARS OF AGE.

EVEN SO, I'VE ALWAYS HAD A VERY CLEAR MEMORY-IMAGE OF HER IN MY MIND. THE IMAGE IS STILL THERE.

EXCEPT THE EYES. THEY ARE GONE, ALMOST AS IF THEY'VE BEEN... ERASED.

AND I FEAR THAT IS *EXACTLY* WHAT HAS HAPPENED.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

I WOULDN'T BE TOO WORRIED IF IT WAS JUST MY MOTHER'S EYES THAT SEEMED TO BE MISSING.

BUT THERE ARE SOME OTHER THINGS, SUBSTANTIAL GAPS AND HOLES IN MY MEMORY. I WAS USING THE ENCEPHALO-ENHANCER TO PROBE THE BREAKS WHEN YOU SURPRISED ME WITH THE BIRTHDAY CAKE.

THAT IN ITSELF WAS A FURTHER INDICATION THAT ALL IS NOT AS IT SHOULD BE, BY THE WAY. I HAD *COMPLETELY FORGOTTEN* TODAY IS MY BIRTHDAY. IT'S NOT SOMETHING I GIVE MUCH THOUGHT TO, AS YOU KNOW. AND THAT SEEMS TO BE TYPICAL OF WHAT'S MISSING.

YOU MEAN, THINGS YOU DON'T OFTEN THINK OF? THINGS THAT MIGHT BE IMPORTANT, BUT NOT ON YOUR MIND ALL THE TIME?

"EXACTLY. AND I BELIEVE I KNOW WHAT HAS HAPPENED. YOU REMEMBER WHEN I WAS CAPTURED BY THE MIND-DRAINING MACHINES OF THE SO-CALLED *PRIEST OF MANTRACORA?*" *

**IT HAPPENED WHILE THE FF WERE EXPLORING THE NEGATIVE ZONE IN ISSUE#'S 254-256.*

THAT EVIL CREATURE USED MENTAL ENERGIES TO POWER HIS SPACE-SHIP, HE HAD DRAINED THE MINDS OF MANY MANTRACORANS. HE ALSO DRAINED MINE.

BUT I SURVIVED, UNLIKE THE OTHERS, AND AT FIRST I THOUGHT IT WAS BECAUSE HE HAD BEEN *GREEDY*, AND HAD TAKEN MORE MINDS THAN HE ACTUALLY NEEDED, MORE THAN HIS MACHINE COULD ASSIMILATE.

NOW I REALIZE THAT HIS INSIDIOUS MACHINE *DID* SUCCEED IN STEALING AT LEAST THAT PART OF MY MIND THAT HELD MY LEAST EXAMINED THOUGHTS, MY OLDEST MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD, OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS OF THE PAST. AND IT TOOK MY MOTHER'S EYES.

OH, REED! HOW AWFUL! IS THERE NOTHING YOU CAN DO?

THAT IS SOMETHING I DO NOT KNOW. I HAVE BEEN TRYING TO ISOLATE THE EXACT POINT OF MY MEMORY FADE-OUT.

IT'S ALMOST... PAINFUL. LIKE A RECORD SKIPPING A GROOVE. I *KNOW* THOSE NOTES ARE THERE, BUT I CAN'T QUITE PICK THEM OUT.

RELAX, MY DARLING. DON'T STRAIN.

BUT I MUST, SUE. IT'S TOO IMPORTANT TO LET SLIDE. THE EARLIEST THING I REMEMBER WAS SO FEW YEARS AGO, JUST BEFORE WE BECAME THE *FANTASTIC FOUR*...

IN FACT, IT WAS IN A WAY THE IMPETUS FOR OUR HURRIED ROCKET RIDE.

THAT TERRIBLE DAY WHEN I *BATTLED GORMUU!*

"IT WAS LATE AT NIGHT, YOU AND I WERE DRIVING HOME FROM THE ROCKET BASE, IN CALIFORNIA.

I'M SO GLAD YOU CAME OUT TO CENTRAL CITY, SUE.

YOU'RE NOT THE ONLY ONE, REED. INCREDIBLE, ISN'T IT? IT SEEMS, LIKE ONLY YESTERDAY I WAS AN IMPULSIVE LITTLE GIRL WITH A GIANT CRUSH ON A CERTAIN COLLEGE SENIOR I KNEW...

I MUST ADMIT YOU WERE A TERRIFIC EMBARRASSMENT BACK THEN. BEN USED TO...

GREAT SCOTT! LOOK OVER THERE!

"IT WAS A TERRIBLE BRIGHT LIGHT, LIKE A MILLION SHOOTING STARS ROLLED INTO ONE.

IT'S LANDED! LANDED! THAT WAS NO CRASH! THE OBJECT SLOWED DOWN!

WHAT IN THE WORLD CAN IT BE?

"VERY QUICKLY WE LEARNED IT WAS NOTHING FROM *THIS* WORLD!

WHAT IS IT, REED?

IT'S... A SHIP! SOME KIND OF ALIEN SPACE-SHIP! IT MUST BE!

THIS IS MARVELOUS! THINK OF THE OPPORTUNITY IT REPRESENTS!

BY STUDYING THAT SHIP, MANKIND COULD LEAP AHEAD A HUNDRED GENERATIONS!

OH, REED! I'M SO FRIGHTENED!

LOOK! SOMETHING IS MOVING IN THE OPEN HATCHWAY!

IT'S THE PILOT! HE'S COMING OUT! WE MUST GREET HIM AS FRIENDS!

WELCOME! WELCOME TO THE PLANET EARTH! MY NAME IS *REED RICHARDS*.

CAN YOU UNDERSTAND ME?

I CAN.

MY NAME IS **GORMUU!** I AM A WARRIOR OF KRAALO!

WARRIOR?

BUT... SURELY A RACE ADVANCED ENOUGH FOR SPACE-TRAVEL WOULD HAVE LEFT ITS WARLIKE HISTORY FAR BEHIND!

HA HA HA! ARE ALL THE CREATURES OF THIS WORLD SO FOOLISH?

IT PLEASES ME TO LEARN THIS. IT WILL MAKE MY *CONQUEST* SO MUCH THE EASIER!

CONQUEST? NO! NO! YOU MUST NOT ATTACK EARTH! THERE IS NO NEED!

WE WILL WELCOME YOU AS AN AMBASSADOR! ALL YOU CRAVE WILL BE YOURS!

"BUT THE MONSTER CALLED GORMUU ONLY LAUGHED AND WALKED AWAY. AND AS HE WALKED, BEFORE OUR ASTONISHED EYES HE BEGAN TO GROW!

REED, HE'S GETTING *BIGGER!* HOW CAN HE BE STOPPED?

"IN THE TERRIBLE HOURS THAT FOLLOWED IT BEGAN TO LOOK AS IF GORMUU COULD NOT BE STOPPED. AT LEAST, NOT BY THE PUNY WEAPONS OF MODERN MAN.

"IN THE HEART OF A TERRIBLE STORM OF DESTRUCTIVE FORCE GORMUU LAUGHED LONG AND LOUD!

FOOLS! FOOLS! HURL YOUR TINY MIGHT AGAINST GORMUU!

IT WILL ONLY MAKE ME *STRONGER!*

"AS CENTRAL CITY'S LEADING SCIENTIST I WAS CALLED ON TO SEEK A WAY OF DESTROYING THE MONSTER.

THIS MAP SHOWS GORMUU'S PATH OF DESTRUCTION. THERE IS NO PATTERN TO IT.

BLAST! I WAS HOPING I MIGHT LEARN A WEAKNESS BY STUDYING THE AREAS HE AVOIDED.

GENERAL, THE MONSTER IS RIGHT ON THE OUTSKIRT OF THE CITY!!

AT HIS PRESENT RATE OF PROGRESS GORMUU WILL BE IN THE MIDDLE OF CENTRAL CITY WITHIN FIVE HOURS!

WE MUST EVACUATE THE CITY! THOUSANDS OF LIVES ARE IN DANGER IF GORMUU GETS HERE!

THEY'LL BE IN EVEN GREATER DANGER IF WE ARE FORCED TO DO WHAT I FEAR WE MUST!

ONLY *NUCLEAR WEAPONS* WILL HAVE ANY CHANCE OF STOPPING GORMUU!

THIS IS GENERAL FERGUSSON! GET ME THE PRESIDENT!

U.S.

"AND SO THE MOMENTOUS DECISION WAS MADE...

I AGREE, GENERAL! IF THIS MONSTER IS TO BE STOPPED WE MUST NOT FALTER IN OUR RESISTANCE!

BUT BEFORE WE CAN AUTHORIZE THE ABOVE-GROUND DETONATION OF A NUCLEAR DEVICE I MUST INFORM THE RUSSIAN PREMIERE OF OUR PLANS!

"AND THAT WAS WHEN WE HIT A MAJOR SNAG!

OF COURSE I UNDERSTAND YOUR PROBLEM, MISTER PRESIDENT!

BUT *YOU* MUST UNDERSTAND THAT THE PEACE-LOVING PEOPLES OF THE SOVIET UNION CANNOT PERMIT A FORCEFUL USE OF NUCLEAR ARMS!

"WHEN WORD GOT BACK TO US AT THE ROCKET GROUP I WAS STUNNED!

THE FOOLS! PLAYING POLITICAL GAMES WHEN THE WHOLE NATION, PERHAPS THE WHOLE WORLD IS AT STAKE!

"WITHIN MINUTES I WAS RACING OUT THE MAIN GATES OF THE DEVELOPMENT COMPLEX...

THERE IS ONLY ONE HOPE, ONE CHANCE! IF I CAN GET INTO GORMUU'S SHIP...

DS

RICHARDS

... THERE'S A CHANCE I CAN DISCOVER SOMETHING, ANYTHING THAT MIGHT GIVE US A CLUE AS TO HOW HE CAN BE DEFEATED!

"GETTING ABOARD THE ALIEN VESSEL PROVED EASIER THAN I HAD DARED HOPE...

THERE DO NOT SEEM TO BE ANY ALARM SYSTEMS, OR GUARDS! GORMUU HAS LEFT HIS SHIP COMPLETELY DEFENSELESS!

"ONCE INSIDE I IMMEDIATELY DISCOVERED WHY GORMUU DID NOT NEED GUARDS!

THE SHIP IS A SCIENTIFIC WONDERLAND! BUT IT'S TOO FAR ADVANCED, TOO FAR BEYOND OUR EARTHLY SYSTEMS!

IT WOULD TAKE A LIFE-TIME TO EVEN BEGIN TO COMPREHEND THESE MARVELS!

"SUDDENLY, IN THE MIDST OF ALL THAT DIZZYING CONFUSION, I FOUND SOMETHING I COULD UNDERSTAND!

THE PILOT'S SEAT! BUT WHAT ARE THOSE STRANGE DEVICES AT THE TOP?

THEY LOOK SOMEHOW FAMILIAR, BUT I CAN'T PLACE WHAT THEY ARE!

"JUST THEN I NOTICED SOMETHING ELSE THAT SEEMED TO FIT THE PICTURE FORMING LIKE A JIG-SAW PUZZLE IN MY MIND!

GIANT POWER RELAYS! TO REGULATE THE FLOW OF ENORMOUS ENERGIES!

OF COURSE!

THAT'S THE ANSWER! IT HAS TO BE! BUT BEFORE I CAN BE ABSOLUTELY CERTAIN I MUST CHECK ONE MORE THING!

"SCARCELY DARING TO BELIEVE WHAT I HAD DISCOVERED I RAN FROM THE SPACE-SH P, MY EYES SEARCHING THE SOFT EARTH AROUND THE LANDING SITE, UNTIL I FOUND...

THERE! THAT'S WHAT I'M LOOKING FOR!

"I DREW A SMALL WOODEN RULER FROM MY POCKET, AND...

I WAS RIGHT!

"MY HEART WAS POUNDING LIKE A JACKHAMMER AS I RACED BACK TO MY CAR! IF ONLY I NOW HAD TIME!

IT'S THE ONLY POSSIBLE SOLUTION!

AND THE ONE THING GORMUU COULD NOT EXPECT!

"WITHIN MINUTES I WAS BACK AT THE ROCKET GROUP, WORKING FEVERISHLY TO ADAPT THE SPECIAL *BROADCAST POWER UNIT* I HAD BEEN DEVELOPING AS ONE OF OUR GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS!

REED, WHY ARE YOU STILL HERE? GENERAL FERGUSSON ORDERED THE BASE EVACUATED!

YEAH, C'MON, BIG BRAIN! THIS AIN'T NO TIME FER TINKERIN' WITH YER ERECTOR SET!

SUE! BEN!

DON'T INTERRUPT ME NOW! I MUST PREPARE THE POWER BEAMER BEFORE GORMUU COMES!

POWER BEAMER? SAY, PAL, HAVE YOU FLIPPED? GORMUU FEEDS ON POWER! THAT'LL MAKE HIM STRONGER!

BIGGER, BEN, *BIGGER!* DON'T CONFUSE THE TWO! I INTEND TO GIVE HIM A MASSIVE DOSE OF POWER!

WHAT? I THINK YER CRACKIN' UNDER TH' STRAIN, REED! THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT GORMUU WANTS!

NO, BEN! JUST TRUST ME!

"BUT MY OLD COLLEGE ROOMIE AND BEST FRIEND, *BEN GRIMM*, WAS TOO IMPETUOUS TO ACCEPT WHAT I WAS DOING WITHOUT THE DETAILED EXPLANATION I SIMPLY HAD NO TIME TO GIVE HIM.

BEN! LET GO OF ME!

SNAP OUT OF IT, PAL! THIS IS CRAZY!

"THEN, I DID SOMETHING I NEVER WOULD HAVE DONE UNDER DIFFERENT CIRCUMSTANCES!

I'M SORRY, BEN! BUT YOU LEAVE ME NO CHOICE!

REED, NO! I CAN'T BELIEVE THIS IS HAPPENING! YOU AND BEN HAVE BEEN FRIENDS FOR YEARS!

DON'T WASTE TIME TRYIN' TA REASON WITH 'IM, SUZIE. JUST HELP ME STOP HIM!

YOU'RE TOO LATE TO STOP ME, BEN! I'VE ACTIVATED THE AUTOMATIC SEQUENCES! NOTHING YOU CAN DO WILL STOP MY PLAN!

"THEN WE COULD ALL ONLY WATCH AS THE NOW GIGANTIC GORMUU LUMBERED EVER CLOSER!

I SENSE GREAT POWER HERE! POWER TO FEED GORMUU!

HE'S ALMOST IN RANGE!

THE PUNY EARTH CREATURES NO LONGER EVEN TRY TO RESIST!

ALL ARE HELPLESS BEFORE THE MIGHT OF GORMUU!

"AT LAST AS GORMUU STRODE INTO THE ROCKET GROUP COMPOUND...

WHAT?! A WEAPON DIRECTED AGAINST ME?

NO! NOT A WEAPON! A POWER BEAM!

YES! YES! GIVE ME *MORE!* MORE POWER!

BUT WAIT... SOMETHING IS... WRONG!

THE POWER SURGES WITHIN ME... BUT I DO NOT GROW STRONGER!

I GROW *WEAKER!!*

I AM ALMOST AS BIG AS THE PLANET, YET I DO NO DAMAGE!

IT IS AS IF I AM NO MORE THAN A PHANTOM!

WHAT IS HAPPENING TO ME?

I AM *DEFEATED!!*

NOOOOOOOOO...

"AND, BACK AT MY ROCKET GROUP...

HE... HE'S *GONE!*

NOT GONE, BENJAMIN! DISSIPATED! SPREAD OUT SO THIN HIS ATOMS WILL NOW DRIFT ACROSS THE UNIVERSE, SPREADING THINNER AND THINNER UNTIL GORMUU IS TRULY NO MORE!

BUT, REED, HOW DID YOU KNOW...?

" I CHECKED GORMUU'S SHIP, AND DISCOVERED HE FED ON A KIND OF BROADCAST POWER! BUT I ALSO DISCOVERED HE NEEDED THE SHIP'S MECHANISMS TO CONTROL THE GROWTH THAT POWER CAUSED! THEN I MEASURED THE DEPTH OF HIS FOOTPRINTS, AND...

HMM! ALTHOUGH GORMUU IS GETTING BIGGER IS FOOTPRINTS ARE NOT GETTING DEEPER!

I REALIZED EVEN THOUGH HE WAS GAINING *SIZE* HE WAS NOT GAINING *MASS* OR *WEIGHT!* HE WAS JUST *INFLATING.* NOW, GORMUU THE INFINITE MONSTER HAS BECOME TRULY INFINITE!

OH, REED, DARLING, I'LL NEVER DOUBT YOU AGAIN!

ME NEITHER, PAL. NEXT TIME I START HASSLIN' YA ABOUT ONE A' YER SCHEMES, YOU JUST *POP* ME ONE AGAIN!

I HOPE IT WILL NEVER COME TO THAT, OLD FRIEND. I STILL NEED YOU TO PILOT MY EXPERIMENTAL STAR-DRIVE ROCKET. IN FACT I NEED YOU NOW MORE THAN EVER!

MANKIND HAS TAKEN HIS FIRST FALTERING STEPS INTO THE UNIVERSE AROUND US, BUT THIS EXPERIENCE WITH GORMUU HAS SHOWN THAT UNIVERSE TO BE MORE DANGEROUS THAN ANYONE EVER SUSPECTED.

AND THAT'S WHERE IT REALLY ALL BEGAN, MY DESPERATE HASTE TO GET THE ROCKET *FINISHED*, TO TEST THE STAR-DRIVE AT ANY COST.

BUT THE COST TURNED OUT TO BE GREATER THAN I HAD IMAGINED. THE *COSMIC RAYS* THAT PENETRATED OUR WEAK SHIELDING GAVE US OUR *POWERS*, BUT AT THE PRICE OF POOR BEN'S VERY *HUMANITY!*

YOU MUSTN'T BLAME YOURSELF, REED. BEN IS CONTENT NOW WITH HIS LIFE AS THE *THING*...

IS HE, SUE? COULD ANYONE EVER BE WHOLLY CONTENT TO BE TRAPPED INSIDE THE BODY OF A *MONSTER?*

WHILE WE WERE AWAY ON THE PLANET OF THE "SECRET WARS" HE BECAME ABLE TO CHANGE BACK TO *BEN GRIMM* AT WILL. HE STAYED ON THAT PLANET TO COME TO TERMS WITH THAT... AND WITH HIMSELF.*

BUT THAT WAS BECAUSE I TOLD HIM THE TRANSFORMATION WAS DUE TO SOME UNKNOWN ELEMENT IN THE NATURE OF THE PLANET ITSELF.

HOW WILL HE FEEL WHEN HE RETURNS--*IF* HE RETURNS--AND DISCOVERS I *LIED?*

*SEE CURRENT ISSUES OF *MARVEL SUPER-HEROES: SECRET WARS* AND *THE THING.*

IT WASN'T A *LIE*, MY DARLING. NOT REALLY. I KNOW I WASN'T THERE TO SEE OR HEAR WHAT HAPPENED, BUT YOU AND JOHNNY HAVE DESCRIBED IT ALL TO ME.

YOU TOLD BEN WHAT HE *NEEDED* TO HEAR. THE TRUTH WOULD HAVE BEEN FAR WORSE, FAR, FAR, MORE PAINFUL AND TRAUMATIC THAN WHAT YOU SAID INSTEAD.

I THINK YOU MADE THE RIGHT CHOICE. AND I THINK BEN WOULD AGREE, IF HE COULD SOMEHOW EVER KNOW THE TRUTH.

PERHAPS. IT'S A LITTLE LIKE CONTEMPLATING WHAT SOUND ONE HAND CLAPPING WOULD MAKE. BEN MUST NEVER BE TOLD, SO WE'LL NEVER REALLY KNOW IF BEN WILL APPROVE OR DISAPPROVE. WE'LL NEVER KNOW EITHER ANSWER.

BUT, BE THAT AS IT MAY. WE SEEM TO HAVE WANDERED FROM MY ORIGINAL PROBLEM SOMEWHAT. LET'S REJOIN THE PARTY, SHALL WE? I THINK I HAVE AN ANNOUNCEMENT TO MAKE.

AN ANNOUNCEMENT?

YES, THERE IS ONLY ONE WAY I CAN EVER FULLY RESOLVE THE QUESTION OF MY MISSING MEMORIES.

"FIRST THING TOMORROW MORNING WE'LL ALL BE HEADING OUT TO *CALIFORNIA*.

"WE'RE GOING BACK TO CENTRAL CITY!"

*AND SO, SOME TWELVE HOURS LATER THE LONG-RANGE **FANTASTICAR** CUTS A SILVERY SWATH OVER THE CALIFORNIA ROCKIES...*

AND, WITHIN MINUTES...

THERE IT IS! THE RICHARDS FAMILY ESTATE!

WOW, REED! IT'S EVEN BIGGER THAN I REMEMBERED!

QUICKLY REED RICHARDS CUTS THE FORWARD THRUST, AND THE UNIQUE VEHICLE SETTLES SILENTLY ONTO THE FRONT DRIVE...

OH, MAN! SOAK UP SOME OF THAT GLORIOUS CALIFORNIA SUN. SURE BEATS SUNNING ON THE ROOF OF THE BAXTER BUILDING!

EVERYTHING SMELLS WONDERFUL. IS THERE A LOT OF FOLIAGE-- LOTS OF FLOWERS AND PLANTS?

YOU BET. I WISH YOU COULD SEE IT ALL, ALICIA. I REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME I CAME OUT HERE WITH SUE, WHEN I WAS ABOUT FIFTEEN, I THOUGHT THE WHOLE STATE OF CALIFORNIA MUST HAVE BEEN CREATED JUST TO HOLD THIS PLACE.

I CHECKED AND THE BUTLER AND HIS WIFE HAVE BEEN DRAWING THEIR REGULAR SALARY ALL THESE YEARS. LET'S HOPE THEY'RE HOME.

BET

A FEW ANXIOUS MINUTES TICK BY, THEN...

YES, SIR, MAY I... OH MY GOODNESS! IT'S MASTER REED!

HELLO, PEACOCK. IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME, HASN'T IT?

IT HAS INDEED, SIR! IT HAS INDEED! BUT... PLEASE, WON'T YOU ALL COME IN?

THANK YOU, PEACOCK. HOW IS EVERYTHING? HOW IS YOUR WIFE?

OH, SHE IS VERY WELL, THANK YOU, SIR. SHE'LL BE DELIGHTED TO SEE YOU... AH... ALL.

AH, YES, I SUPPOSE SOME INTRODUCTIONS ARE IN ORDER.

NATURALLY YOU REMEMBER MY WIFE, SUSAN, AND THIS IS OUR GOOD FRIEND *WYATT WINGFOOT*.

THE TALL LADY IS, OF COURSE, *SHE-HULK*.

AND EVEN THOUGH YOU HAVEN'T SEEN HIM IN HALF A DOZEN YEARS, YOU REMEMBER SUE'S BROTHER, *JOHNNY STORM*.

AND LAST, BUT BY NO MEANS LEAST, ALICIA MASTERS.

AND, AH... SOMEWHERE AROUND HERE IS A SMALL BLOND BLUR WHO HAPPENS TO BE MY SON, *FRANKLIN*.

ALICIA MASTERS? *THE* ALICIA MASTERS? THIS IS INDEED A PLEASURE, MA'AM. MY WIFE AND I ATTENDED A SHOWING OF YOUR SCULPTURES IN LOS ANGELES SOME MONTHS AGO. WE WERE BOTH AMAZED THAT A... BLIND GIRL COULD PRODUCE SUCH MARVELOULY DETAILED WORK.

WHY, THANK YOU, MR. PEACOCK.

OH, PLEASE, CALL ME JUST PEACOCK, MISS MASTERS. WE OLD FAMILY RETAINERS GET ALL FLUSTERED IF SOMEONE CALLS US "MISTER".

GILES!

GILES, I FOUND THIS YOUNG RASCAL RAIDIN' THE COOKIE JAR. WHERE IN THE WORLD DID HE...

OH MY, WORD!

WE WILL LOOK AWAY FOR A MOMENT FROM THE REPITITION OF INTRODUCTIONS...

MASTER REED! MISS SUSAN! YOU'VE COME HOME AT LAST!

...AND REJOIN OUR CAST AND CREW SOME THIRTY MINUTES LATER.

WHAT I DON'T UNDERSTAND IS HOW THE *FF* CAN HAVE HAD FINANCIAL PROBLEMS IN THE PAST IF YOU STILL OWN A FABULOUS ESTATE LIKE THIS?

THAT'S A GOOD POINT. DIDN'T YOU ACTUALLY GO BANKRUPT A FEW YEARS AGO, BEFORE I FIRST MET YOU ALL?

YES, WE DID WYATT. THE SITUATION IS SOMEWHAT MORE COMPLICATED THAN IT SEEMS. MY FATHER DEPARTED FOR POINTS UNKNOWN SOME THREE YEARS BEFORE WE BECAME THE FANTASTIC FOUR, BUT BEFORE HE VANISHED HE MADE SOME DETAILED ARRANGEMENTS. HE LEFT ME TWO BILLION DOLLARS, MOST OF WHICH I SPENT ON THE ROCKET PROJECT.

HE ALSO CREATED A SELF-PERPETUATING FUND FOR THE UPKEEP OF THIS ESTATE, AND THE SUPPORT OF MR. & MRS. PEACOCK. YOU SEE, HE ARRANGED THINGS SO THAT HE COULD NOT BE LEGALLY DECLARED DEAD NO MATTER HOW LONG HE WAS MISSING, AND HE WANTED EVERYONE LOOKED AFTER.

EVERYTHING IS WELL WITH YOU, I TAKE IT, PEACOCK?

OH, YES, MASTER REED. EVERYTHING IS ABSOLUTELY FINE...

... EXCEPT FOR THE *GHOSTS*, OF COURSE!

THE *WHAT??!*

"WELL, I DON'T KNOW WHAT ELSE TO CALL THEM, SIR. THERE HAVE BEEN A NUMBER OF... MANIFESTATIONS, BUT THE FIRST WAS JUST AFTER YOUR FATHER VANISHED.

"IT STARTED WITH VOICES IN THE NIGHT.

"AT FIRST I THOUGHT IT MIGHT BE KIDS, KIDS LARKING ABOUT THINKING THE HOUSE WAS EMPTY...

"BUT I FOLLOWED THE SOUNDS AND THEY LED ME INTO THE SUB-BASEMENTS...

"ALL THE WAY TO THE LOCKED DOOR OF YOUR FATHER'S LAB.

DO N
ENTE

"AND THEN!!

"RIGHT THROUGH THE WALL THEY CAME, BIG AS LIFE AND TRANSPARENT AS GLASS!

"WELL, MASTER REED, IT WAS JUST AS IF ALL THE WIND HAD BEEN KNOCKED RIGHT OUT OF ME!

"I COLLAPSED IN THE CORNER, AS CLOSE TO A HEART-ATTACK AS I EVER WANT TO GET, AND JUST LAY THERE TREMBLING UNTIL MRS. P. CAME DOWN TO GET ME."

GREAT SCOTT! AND YOU SAY THIS WAS THE FIRST MANIFESTATION? HOW MANY OTHERS WERE THERE? AND WITH WHAT FREQUENCY?

THERE HAVE BEEN THIRTEEN APPEARANCES ALL TOGETHER, SIR. SECOND WAS SIX YEARS AGO, THEN THREE, THEN LAST YEAR. THEN THEY CAME EVERY FEW MONTHS FOR AWHILE, THEN EVERY FEW WEEKS. THEN DAYS. THE LAST WAS THREE DAYS AGO.

HM! DIMINISHING CYCLES OF MULTIPLES OF THREE! THAT ALMOST SOUNDS LIKE A TAFT-DeMAIBRING SEQUENCE. BUT THAT CAN'T BE. THAT WOULD REQUIRE AN OPERATIONAL, FUNCTIONING...

THESE SO-CALLED GHOSTS HAVE NOT HARMED YOU OR MRS. P. IN ANY WAY?

OH, NO, SIR. IT'S AS IF WE WEREN'T EVEN HERE. IN FACT, IT'S GOT SO WE DON'T EVEN REALLY FEAR THEM ANYMORE.

I SEE. I THINK IT'S TIME WE TOOK A LOOK AT MY FATHER'S LAB, PEACOCK.

AND SO, A FEW MINUTES LATER, LEAVING ALICIA AND MRS. PEACOCK UPSTAIRS TO WATCH OVER YOUNG FRANKLIN, A SMALL GROUP GATHERS BEFORE THE LONG-LOCKED LAB DOOR...

THERE IT IS, SIR. HASN'T BEEN OPENED SINCE YOUR FATHER LEFT US,

AND THAT LOCK LOOKS AS IF IT WAS NEVER MEANT TO OPEN AGAIN!

HEY, NO SWEAT, REED! THAT DOOR DOESN'T LOOK TO BE MORE THAN A FEW INCHES THICK. ONE GOOD TAP SHOULD OPEN IT UP!

SHE-HULK, WAIT! WE HAVE NO IDEA WHAT MANNER OF DEFENSE SYSTEMS MY FATHER MIGHT 'HAVE SET. IF WE FORCE THE DOOR THE WHOLE LAB MIGHT SELF-DESTRUCT.

SUSAN, I THINK IT'S YOUR PARTICULAR TALENTS THAT WILL BEST AVAIL US AT THIS JUNCTURE...

YES, I THINK I SEE WHAT YOU MEAN, REED.

*SILENT, UNMOVING, THE BEAUTIFUL **INVISIBLE GIRL** CONCENTRATES, AND STRANGE ENERGIES FLOW FROM HER COSMICLY IRRADIATED CELLS.*

ONE BY ONE THE LAYERS OF THE DOOR FADE INTO INVISIBILITY, AND THE HIDDEN MECHANISMS SLOWLY REVEAL THEMSELVES.

UNTIL...

THERE! I WAS RIGHT! A SERIES OF TRIP-LOCKS SET TO DETONATE AN EXPLOSIVE CHARGE.

JOHNNY, IT'S YOUR TURN NOW I THINK.

HEY, AND ABOUT TIME, TOO! I WAS JUST ABOUT BORED ENOUGH TO BLOW THIS GIG AND HEAD FOR THE BEACH! *FLAME ON!*

AT EASE, SON. I'M AFRAID WE DON'T NEED YOUR FULL POWER JUST NOW.

I NEED YOUR MOST FINELY CONTROLLED PRECISION BURNING ON THIS JOB, JOHNNY!

WHILST SUE MAINTAINS THE INVISIBILITY OF THE OUTER PARTS OF THE DOOR. I NEED YOU TO BURN THROUGH AND FUSE THE CIRCUITRY IN THAT TRIP-LOCK.

NO PROBLEM, BOSS-MAN. UNFORTUNATELY, ALSO NO FUN!

CAUTIOUSLY, FOLLOWING HIS BROTHER-IN-LAW'S INSTRUCTIONS, THE HUMAN TORCH MELTS THROUGH THE UNSEEN LAYERS OF THE DOOR UNTIL...

THERE YOU GO, REED. THAT'S THE LAST OF 'EM. JUST HOPE MY ADORING FANS NEVER FIND OUT ABOUT THIS.

IT'S NOT EXACTLY IN KEEPING WITH MY FLAMBOYANT IMAGE!

THE DELICATE LOCK MECHANISM THUS NEUTRALIZED, A GENTLE PUSH IS ALL THAT IS NEEDED TO OPEN THE DOOR AND REVEAL...

WOW!

"WOW" INDEED, SHE-HULK. MY FATHER WAS A SCIENTIFIC GENIUS, BUT TO THINK HE BUILT THIS LAB *YEARS* BEFORE THE ROCKET FLIGHT THAT CREATED THE F.F.... AND ALL THESE MARVELS HAVE LAIN FALLOW SINCE THEN!

DOES IT JOG ANY MEMORIES, REED?

WHAT AN APPALLING WASTE!

I'M AFRAID NOT. I DON'T EVEN REMEMBER IF I' EVER SEEN THIS ROOM BEFORE.

WHAT ABOUT THIS RECTANGULAR AREA ON THE FLOOR, REED. IS IT... COULD IT BE WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE?

IT IS! IT'S A TIME-PLATFORM--A *TIME MACHINE*-- VIRTUALLY IDENTICAL TO THE ONE WE HAVE IN THE PHYSICS LAB OF THE BAXTER BUILDING, THE ONE WE CAPTURED FROM THE CASTLE OF *DOCTOR DOOM*, AFTER OUR FIRST BATTLE WITH HIM... *

BUT... THAT WOULD MEAN MY FATHER CONSTRUCTED THIS DEVICE *BEFORE* DOOM BUILT HIS. MY FATHER MADE THE FIRST TIME TRAVEL MACHINE! AND THIS COULD VERY WELL EXPLAIN PEACOCK'S "GHOSTS".

* WAY, WAY BACK IN F.F. #5.

YES- THE CONTROLS ARE SET FOR *YESTERDAY'S DATE*. MY FATHER MUST HAVE ATTEMPTED TO TRAVEL INTO HIS FUTURE, OUR PRESENT!

BECAUSE THE MACHINE IS STILL OPERATIONAL A PARTIAL RIPPLE EFFECT HAS BEEN CAUSING TEMPORAL DISPLACEMENT WITH INCREASING FREQUENCY AS THE SET DATE APPROACHED.

WHAT... WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO NOW, DARLING?

*SUSAN RICHARD'S VOICE CATCHES, FOR SHE ALREADY **KNOWS** WHAT REED WILL SAY.*

THERE IS ONLY ONE THING TO DO, SUSAN. MY OWN EXPERIMENTS WITH DOOM'S MACHINE HAVE SHOWN THERE IS MUCH, MUCH MORE TO WHAT WE THINK OF AS TIME TRAVEL THAN ANYONE HAS GUESSED.

IF MY FATHER ATTEMPTED TO USE THIS MACHINE TO JOURNEY TO HIS FUTURE, MY EXPERIMENTS HAVE PROVEN HE WOULD HAVE, IN ACTUALITY, BEEN SHUNTED *SIDEWAYS* IN A PARALLEL TIME-STREAM.

THERE ARE COUNTLESS *SAFETY VALVES* IN THE SPACE-TIME CONTINUUM.

HE MAY BE STILL ALIVE THERE, TRAPPED ON AN ALIEN "*OTHER EARTH*", AND I AM GOING AFTER HIM! I WILL... I MUST FIND MY FATHER--NO MATTER WHAT THE COST!!!

NEXT ISSUE: PROBABLY THE MOST BIZARRE TALE YOU'VE EVER READ IN THE PAGES OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST COMIC MAGAZINE. BE HERE IN 30 DAYS FOR...

COWBOYS & IDIOMS

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COWBOYS and IDIOMS

A SUB-BASEMENT OF A CALIFORNIA MANSION. STRANGE SOUNDS FILL THE AIR AS AN OLD LABORATORY, UNUSED NOW FOR YEARS, GRUMBLES TO LIFE.

BENEATH THE FEET OF THE FIVE ADVENTURERS, A GOLDEN RECTANGLE BEGINS TO PULSE WITH UNIMAGINABLE ENERGIES.

I SHOW ALL SYSTEMS GREEN FOR GO, REED. WE CAN START THIS HAY-RIDE ANY TIME YOU'RE READY.

THANK YOU, SHE-HULK. THE COUNTDOWN IS COMMENCED. WE'LL BE ON OUR WAY IN LESS THAN ONE MINUTE.

WYATT, THERE'S STILL TIME FOR YOU TO STEP OUT. THERE'S REALLY NO REASON FOR YOU TO ENDANGER YOURSELF ALONG WITH THE REST OF US.

DON'T WORRY ABOUT ME, REED. THIS IS *EXACTLY* THE KIND OF ACTION I WAS LOOKING FOR WHEN I LEFT MY RESERVATION TO JOIN YOU ALL AGAIN.

WE'RE *ALL* COMING ALONG, REED DARLING. THIS IS TOO IMPORTANT TO RISK YOU GOING OFF ALONE. WHERE *MISTER FANTASTIC* GOES, THE REST OF THE *FANTASTIC FOUR* WILL FOLLOW!

SO QUIT YOUR FROWNIN' BROTHER-IN-LAW, WE'VE RIDDEN GIZMOS LIKE THIS IN THE PAST, AND I'M SURE WE'LL RIDE 'EM AGAIN!

I HAVE MAXIMUM READINGS NOW ON ALL INDICATOR DIALS, MASTER REED. SHALL I PROCEED WITH THE ACTIVATING SEQUENCES?

YES, *PEACOCK*. REMEMBER NOW THAT WE WILL NOT BE ABLE TO COMMUNICATE WITH YOU ONCE WE ARE ACROSS THE DIMENSIONAL BARRIER. WE WILL BE DEPENDING ON YOU TO ACTIVATE THE RETURN SEQUENCE AT TWELVE HOUR INTERVALS UNTIL WE COME BACK.

NEVER FEAR, SIR. I SHALL DO IT.

THEN... FIRE AWAY, PEACOCK!

HERE WE GO-O-O-OHH! IT ALWAYS FEELS SO STRANGE AS THE PLATFORM RISES. IT...TINGLES, AS IF MY WHOLE BODY WERE GETTING PINS AND NEEDLES AS WE PASS THROUGH.

AND IT'S SOMETHING YOU NEVER GET USED TO, EITHER, SIS. I'VE RIDDEN DOCTOR DOOM'S TIME MACHINE MORE OFTEN THAN YOU, AND EVEN THOUGH THIS IS A DIFFERENT MACHINE IT'S THE SAME WEIRD SENSATION.

HOW YOU DOIN', SHE-HULK?

I'LL LET YOU KNOW ONCE I GET OVER BEING *ASTONISHED*, JOHNNY. I STILL HAVE TROUBLE BELIEVING I'M RIDING AN ACTUAL *TIME MACHINE!*

UNDER-STANDABLE, SHE-HULK, I... *GREAT DAY!*

EVERYONE! LOOK OVER THERE!

LOOKS AS IF WE'VE WALKED INTO A *WAR ZONE* AGAIN! THE TERRAIN SURROUNDING THAT TOWN HAS OBVIOUSLY BEEN SHELLED.

BOY, THIS GROUP SURE DOESN'T GET MUCH TIME FOR LAZING AROUND IN THE SUN! IT'S NEVER THIS ROUGH WITH THE *AVENGERS!* *

* SHE-HULK CURRENTLY ENJOYS THE UNIQUE DISTINCTION OF BELONGING TO **BOTH** SUPER-GROUPS, THE AVENGERS AND THE FANTASTIC FOUR.

OH, I'M SURE THEY'VE HAD MORE THAN THEIR SHARE OF EXCITEMENT, SHE-HULK.

IN ANY CASE, THIS DOES NOT APPEAR TO BE AN ACTIVE COMBAT SITUATION. TIME FOR A LITTLE SURREPTITIOUS RECONNAISSANCE, I THINK.

SAY NO MORE, FEARLESS LEADER. I'M ON MY WAY.

FLAME ON!

JOHNNY, STOP!

YOU'RE HARDLY OUR LEAST CONSPICUOUS MEMBER! THIS IS A JOB THAT REQUIRES *STEALTH!*

AND THAT MEANS *ME!* ANYTHING IN PARTICULAR YOU NEED TO KNOW, DARLING?

JUST THE GENERAL LAY OF THE LAND, SUE. BE SURE TO AVOID ANY ACTUAL CONFRONTATION WITH THE LOCALS.

IF YOU SENSE ANYTHING THAT MIGHT POTENTIALLY BE TROUBLE, RETREAT AS QUICKLY AS YOU CAN. I DON'T WANT YOU IN JEOPARDY.

PLEASE DON'T FUSS SO, REED. I'M PERFECTLY CAPABLE OF TAKING CARE OF MYSELF!

I KNOW THAT MY DARLING. IT'S JUST THAT... I MEAN, SINCE WE LOST THE BABY...

ALL RIGHT! WE'LL DISCUSS IT LATER. NOW STOP WORRYING!

I DO WISH REED WOULD STOP TREATING ME LIKE A FRAGILE CHINA DOLL.

I KNOW HE MEANS WELL, BUT I'VE PROVEN MY VALUE AND RESILIENCE A HUNDRED TIMES OVER. I'M NOT ABOUT TO GO BACK TO THE SIDELINES NOW.

HMM. REED'S RIGHT ABOUT ONE THING, THOUGH. THESE SHELL-FORMED CRATERS ARE QUITE OLD--AT LEAST SEVERAL YEARS.

WHATEVER FIGHTING CAUSED THEM WAS SOME TIME AGO. I WONDER WHY THE DAMAGE HASN'T BEEN REPAIRED YET?

I MUST ADMIT THIS WHOLE AREA IS NOTHING LIKE WHAT I EXPECTED TO FIND. REED'S FATHER USED HIS TIME MACHINE TO TRAVEL INTO HIS FUTURE-- TO OUR *PRESENT!*

THEORIES ON TIME TRAVEL SUGGEST THAT SUCH A TRIP WOULD ACTUALLY HAVE CAUSED THE TRAVELLER TO BE SHUNTED *SIDEWAYS,* INTO A *PARALLEL UNIVERSE.*

BY ADJUSTING THE MACHINE AND USING IT AT THE SAME POWER LEVELS, RATHER THAN TRAVELING THROUGH TIME, WE HOPED TO END UP AT THE SAME DIMENSIONAL CO-ORDINATES AS RICHARDS SENIOR.

BUT THIS LOOKS NOTHING LIKE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA...

...OR 1984, FOR THAT MATTER. THIS LOOKS LIKE SOMETHING OUT OF THE OLD WEST, TOMBSTONE, OR DODGE CITY.

NO SIGN OF LIFE ANYWHERE. BUT I THINK IT'S PROBABLY TIME FOR SUSAN STORM RICHARDS TO TAKE HER LEAVE...

...SO THAT THE *INVISIBLE GIRL* CAN EXPLORE UNOBTRUSIVELY.

WAIT... VOICES RAISED IN ANGER, COMING FROM THAT BUILDING.

WHY, YUH MIS'RABLE TWO-BIT POLE-CAT! I'M GONNA...

POW

WHAT IN THE...?

AH SAID IT WUNCE AN' AH'LL SAY IT AGIN, COLBY.

YORE A LYIN', ROTTEN CHEAT, AN' I KIN *PROVE* IT!

MIGHTY STRONG WORDS, KID.

YUH BETTER HAVE TH' SPEED TUH BACK 'EM UP WITH.

GIT ON DOWN TH' STREET, BOY, AH'M CALLIN' YUH OUT!

START SAYIN' YORE PRAYERS, COLBY. AIN'T NOBODY FASTER'N ME!

IT'S A SHOOT OUT! AN ACTUAL, OLD-TIME GUN FIGHT! BETTER BIDE MY TIME BEFORE I INTERFERE, THOUGH.

I MIGHT CAUSE MORE DAMAGE THAN I PREVENT IF I'M NOT CAREFUL. AND ONE OF MY INVISIBLE FORCE-FIELDS PROJECTED BETWEEN THEM CAN EASILY PREVENT UNNECESSARY BLOODSHED.

BUT THOSE OLD SIX-SHOOTERS WERE NONE TOO ACCURATE. I'D BETTER STAY OUT OF THE LINE OF FIRE.

OKAY, KID. IT'S ALL YOURS.

TAKE YORE BEST SHOT.

DON'T WAIT ON ME, COLBY. DO THAT AN' YOU'LL HAVE DAYLIGHT THROUGH YUH BEFORE YUH CLEAR LEATHER.

NOW... *DRAW!!*

GOT TO PROJECT A FORCE FIELD.

NOW!

UNSEEN BY HUMAN EYE, THE VERY AIR BETWEEN THE TWO GUNSLINGERS SEEMS TO THICKEN AND HARDEN.

THEN...

WHUT IN TARNATION...?

HEAT-SEEKER! HE'S USIN' A HEAT SEEKER!

UNERRINGLY, THE TINY MISSILE FINDS ITS MARK...

THAT WAS SOME FANCY SHOOTIN', COLBY!

AH NEVER THOUGHT AH'D SEE ANYONE DROP TH' KID!

SHUDDUP! SOMETHIN' MADE MUH SHOT GO ALL CRAZY AN' WILD. AN' I AIMS TO FIND OUT *WHAT!*

SEEMS LIKE THERE MUSTA BIN SOMETHIN' BETWIXT ME AN' TH' KID.

SOMETHIN' WE CAIN'T SEE...

AN' THAT SMELLS LIKE MAYBE TH' WARLORD'S BREAKIN' TH' TRUCE.

WARLORD? TRUCE? WHAT IN THE WORLD IS GOING ON HERE?

THOSE ARE CERTAINLY NOT CONVENTIONAL NINETEENTH CENTURY WEAPONS.

IS IT POSSIBLE REED WAS WRONG? THAT THIS ISN'T SOME ALTERNATE PRESENT-DAY... ...BUT IN FACT SOME MAD *FUTURE* PERIOD?

YUP, THAR'S DEFINITLY SOMEONE THAR. SOMEONE WE CAIN'T SEE.

SOME KIND OF INFRA-RED SCANNER ON HIS GUN!

HE'S TRACKING ME, EVEN THOUGH I'M STILL INVISIBLE.

BUT I CAN FIX *THAT!*

ANOTHER MANIFESTATION OF HER POWER FLOWS FROM HER IRRADIATED CELL STRUCTURE AS THE INVISIBLE GIRL ACTS...

THUNDERATION! NOW MUH GUN'S *VANISHED!*

JUST INVISIBLE, BUT THAT OUGHT TO HOLD THEM LONG ENOUGH FOR ME TO...

BUT...

WAIT! MUH GUN AIN'T VANISHED! I KIN STILL FEEL IT IN MUH HAND!

AN' THAT MEANS AH KIN STILL PULL THE TRIGGER!

BLAST! I WAS HOPING HE'D BE SPOOKED ENOUGH TO DROP HIS WEAPON.

I'VE GOT TO STOP UNDERESTIMATING THESE PEOPLE *RIGHT NOW!* THEY'RE NO STRANGERS TO SCIENCE.

I'VE ALSO GOT TO PROTECT MYSELF!

HEY! AH KIN SEE MUH GUN AGIN! BUT AH STILL CAIN'T SEE WHUT AH'M HITTIN'!

THAT'S BECAUSE YOU'RE NOT HITTING ANYTHING *ALIVE*, FRIEND.

I LET YOUR GUN BECOME VISIBLE SIMPLY BECAUSE IT'S A WASTE OF ENERGY TO KEEP *IT* AND *MYSELF* INVISIBLE, *AND* PROJECT A PROTECTIVE FORCE-FIELD, TOO.

BUT THOSE HEAT-SEEKERS ARE STARTING TO INCH AROUND THE FIELD.

BETTER CLOSE IT INTO A COMPLETE SPHERE-- ALTHOUGH THAT LEAVES ME WITH LIMITED AIR, AND UNABLE TO MOVE.

OR DOES IT? IT'S SOMETHING I'VE NEVER TRIED BEFORE.

EVEN THOUGH MY FORCE FIELD CAN'T BE *SEEN*, IT *IS* STILL THERE, AND SOLID AS STEEL. PERHAPS I CAN *WALK* ON THE FIELD ITSELF.

THIS TRICK WILL REQUIRE COMPLETE CONCENTRATION, SO I'D BETTER LET MYSELF BECOME VISIBLE ONCE AGAIN...

...AND CONCERN MYSELF WITH KEEPING MY BALANCE ONCE I START ROLLING.

TARNATION! IT'S A *WOMAN!* WHUT'S SHE...?

LOOK OUT!

SORRY, COWBOY, BUT I DON'T WANT TO PLAY YOUR LITTLE GAME JUST NOW.

OOOOFF!

GOLLLLLL... *DURN!* WHO,,, *WHAT* WAS SHE?

COLBY'S GOTTA'VE BIN RIGHT. SHE MUST BE ONE A' TH' *WARLORD'S* GANG!

AN' THAT MEANS TH' TRUCE IS DONE AN' BUSTED!

WELL, DON'T JUS' STAND THERE JAWIN' ABOUT IT, YUH MIS'BLE OWL-HOOTS!

GIT TH' HOSSES!

MEANWHILE...

I HATED TO CUT AND RUN LIKE THAT, BUT THERE WAS VERY LITTLE I COULD DO UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES.

I CERTAINLY DIDN'T WANT TO TURN MY SCOUTING VENTURE INTO A MAJOR OFFENSIVE WITHOUT TELLING REED WHAT I'VE SEEN.

HE CAN MAKE THE FINAL DECISION AS TO HOW WE DEAL WITH THESE--!

HUH, WHAT'S THAT ?

THAR SHE IS, BOYS!

ROUND 'ER UP!

GOOD GRIEF!

AT THAT MOMENT...

REMARKABLE! AS I SUSPECTED FROM THE SURROUNDING TERRAIN THIS IS *NOT* SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA. I CANNOT PINPOINT OUR EXACT POSITION, BUT IT WOULD SEEM WE WERE MOVED EASTWARD SOMEWHAT. AND THERE'S SOMETHING ELSE...

SAVE THE INSTANT ANALYSIS, REED...LOOKS LIKE SOMETHING'S UP WITH SUE!

YES, YOU'RE RIGHT, JOHNNY. SHE SEEMS TO BE IN THE MIDDLE OF AN ATTACK BY SOME OF THE INDIGENTS.

ALL RIGHT, EVERYONE, WE'LL HAVE TO CONTINUE OUR DATA GATHERING LATER.

LEAVE THE EQUIPMENT UP HERE, OUT OF SIGHT.

NOW YOU'RE TALKIN'!

INDEED! LET'S SHOW THESE PEOPLE THE ERROR OF THEIR WAYS!

OR, TO PUT THAT IN MORE FAMILIAR TERMS... ***IT'S CLOBBERING TIME!***

YEAH! YEAH! THAT'S THE FLAVOR I'VE BEEN MISSING!

AND, JUST BELOW...

WAAA-HOOO! KEEP 'ER CORRALED, BOYS!

SHE CAIN'T USE HER TRICKS ON US SO LONG AS WE KEEP MOVIN'!!

THEN I GUESS WE'D BETTER SLOW YOU DOWN SOME, HUH?

WHUT TH'...

FOLKS CALL ME THE *HUMAN TORCH*...BUT YOU CAN JUST CALL ME "SIR."

NOW THIS IS MORE LIKE IT! ALL THAT GATHERING DATA IS A TAD TOO MUCK LIKE BEING IN SCHOOL.

AND, UNFORTUNATELY, ONCE REED GETS GOING, THERE'S VERY LITTLE CHANCE FOR A RECESS.

NOT THAT I'M A COMPLETE BARBARIAN, BUT EVER SINCE I BECAME THE *SHE-HULK*--

--I'VE HAD A GREATER TASTE FOR *ACTION!*

NICE WORK, SHE-HULK!

NOW, I'LL JUST TAKE CARE OF THIS FELLOW...

HYUP!!

GOOD ONE, REED!

AND THAT RIDER-LESS HORSIE IS GOING TO DROP RIGHT IN THE OL' POCKET HERE...

...WHERE I CAN GRAB IT...

...RE-SHAPE IT EVER SO SLIGHTLY...

...AND USE IT TO TAKE THE LAST RIDER *OUT!*

YE-OWW!

AND THAT.. MORE OR LESS- TAKES CARE OF THAT!

SUE, DARLING, ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?

I'M FINE, REED, I...

WAIT... THAT VIBRATION IN THE GROUND...

WHAT?

OH, MY GOSH!

GOOD HEAVENS!

IT LOOKS LIKE ONE OF THOSE MARTIAN FIGHTING MACHINES FROM THAT MOVIE, "WAR OF THE WORLDS!"

UH OH.

BETTER TOSS YOU BOYS OUT OF HARM'S WAY. I'M NOT GOING TO HAVE TIME TO GET OUT FROM UNDER THAT...

SHE-HULK!

THEY SQUASHED HER LIKE SHE WASN'T EVEN THERE! I'M GONNA...

BUT...

WHAT TH... SOME KIND OF PINCERS... GOT TO FLY...

NO!

THEY WEREN'T TRYING TO *GRAB* ME! THEY'VE CARBONIZE THE AIR AROUND ME.

I CAN'T BURN THROUGH... FALLING...

JOHNNY! GO LIMP, LAD! I'LL CATCH YOU!

JOHNNY'S SAFE... BUT WHAT ABOUT SHE-HULK...WE'VE GOT TO GET HER. IF SHE'S INJURED...

I DON'T THINK SHE IS, WYATT.

IN FACT, I THINK WE'VE BEEN WORRYING UNNECESSARILY ABOUT OUR JADE GIANTESS.

LOOK!

THE GREAT WAR MACHINE STRIDES ON, THE CRUSHING FOOT-PAD RISES...

AND SECONDS LATER...

FLAMING

KLANG

CRUSH

OKAY, WISE GUYS, LET THAT BE A LESSON TO YOU.

I'VE BEEN STOOD UP IN MY TIME--BUT NEVER STOOD *ON!*

AND JUST TO MAKE SURE YOU DON'T TRY IT AGAIN...!

STRAK!

NOW, LET'S JUST HAVE A LOOK AT WHOEVER'S *DRIVING* THIS THING!

THIS LOOKS LIKE A HATCHWAY TO ME.

KIKT

THERE THEY ARE, BOTH OUT COLD FROM THE LOOK OF 'EM.

BETTER HAUL 'EM OUT OF HERE.

HERE WE GO, REED. THEY'RE SHAKEN UP, BUT ALIVE. I THINK WE CAN GET BETTER ANSWERS OUT OF THESE TWO THAN THOSE COWPOKES.

GOOD WORK, SHE-HULK. BEN WAS RIGHT TO ASK YOU TO TAKE HIS PLACE.*

LOOKS LIKE WE MIGHTA *MISJUDGED* YOU STRANGERS.

*SEE THE ONGOING SAGA OF MARVEL SUPER HEROES: SECRET WARS.

WHO...?

NAME'S COLBY, BRET COLBY. AH'M HEAD HONCHO ROUNDABOUT THESE HERE PARTS.

WE THOUGHT SURE YOU FOLKS WUZ TH' *WARLORD'S* PEOPLE--BUT LOOKS LIKE WE WUZ DEAD WRONG.

I'D SAY SO. WE KNOW NOTHING OF THIS "WARLORD" YOU REFER TO. WE'RE... TRAVELERS FROM ANOTHER COUNTRY. MY NAME'S *REED RICHARDS.*

UH... WELL... UH... WELCOME TO TOWN... RICHARDS...

BUT, COLBY!! IF'N HIS NAME REALLY IS RICHARDS, THEN HE MUST BE SOME *KIN* TO...

SHUDDUP! IT COULD BE JUST A CO-INCIDENCE ...OR MEBBE HE REALLY DON'T *KNOW!*

EITHER WAY, WE CAN USE IT TO OUR ADVANTAGE!

IF'N YOU SAY SO, COLBY. BUT I DON'T LIKE IT. I DON'T LIKE IT ONE BIT.

THEY OFFER WELCOME, BUT THEY'RE OBVIOUSLY NOT READY TO TRUST US ENTIRELY. AND I CAN'T SAY I'M PREPARED TO BE TOO TRUSTING MYSELF.

IF YOU GENTLEMEN HAVE FINISHED YOUR PRIVATE CONVERSATION, PERHAPS WE CAN GET ON WITH QUESTIONING OUR CAPTIVES.

DON'T HOLD YORE BREATH, RICHARDS. THEM THERE TIN SUITS DON'T OPEN UP FOR *NOBODY.*

OH, I THINK I CAN PERSUADE THESE SUCKERS TO OPEN UP...

THERE.

STRK!

NOW WE'LL...

HOLY COW!

HE'S SOME KIND OF... CAVE MAN! A *NEANDERTHAL!*

NOT QUITE, SHE-HULK, BUT CLEARLY SOME SUB-SPECIES OF HOMO-SAPIENS.

HE'S ONE A' TH' WARLORD'S MUTATES, RICHARDS. THEY'S ORNERY CUSSES, TOUGH AS BOOT LEATHER AND DUMB AS DIRT.

MMM. YES, THIS HELMET CONTAINS PSYCHO-NEURO STIMULATORS, CLEARLY INTENDED TO RAISE THE INTELLIGENCE LEVEL OF THE WEARER.

WE'LL GET NO INFORMATION OUT OF THESE POOR SOULS, I'M AFRAID ALTHOUGH THEIR VERY CONDITION SPEAKS VOLUMES.

TELL ME MORE ABOUT THIS WARLORD, COLBY.

AIN'T MUCH TUH TELL. HE TURNED UP ABOUT TEN YEARS BACK. NOBODY KNOWS WHERE HE CAME FROM, OR WHY HE COME. HE BUILT HISSELF A BIG FORT ABOUT A HUNDRED MILES NORTH A' HERE, AN' STARTED IN ORDERIN' US ABOUT.

TEN YEARS? BUT, REED, THAT'S WHEN YOUR FATHER LEFT TO *COME* HERE.

YES, AND THE TECHNOLOGIES WE'VE THUS FAR ENCOUNTERED ARE SIMILAR TO HIS DESIGNS, JOHNNY. IT'S POSSIBLE HE *WAS* DEFLECTED MORE THAN I HAD EVEN CALCULATED, AND ENDED UP ARRIVING HERE THE SAME DAY HE LEFT OUR EARTH, RATHER THAN TEN YEARS INTO THE FUTURE, AS HE PLANNED.

BUT FOR THE MOMENT, THAT'S JUST IDLE SPECULATION. WE HAVE INSUFFICIENT DATA FOR A SOLID ANALYSIS.

STILL, WE KNOW THE MECHANICS OF THE KIND OF TIME MACHINE HE BUILT ARE VERY UNPREDICTABLE. TIME IS NOT, AFTER ALL, A CONVEYOR BELT WHICH WE CAN JUMP ON AND OFF AT WILL.

BUT... EVEN IF HE DID END UP HERE TEN YEARS AGO INSTEAD OF WHEN HE INTENDED, MY FATHER WAS A *PACIFIST.* I CANNOT BELIEVE HE COULD HAVE BECOME THIS *WARLORD.*

THEY ARE DEFINITELY *OUTWORLDERS*, MISTRESS. SHALL I INFORM HIS LORDSHIP OF THEIR ARRIVAL?

NO, NO, I WILL ATTEND TO THAT, GONT. YOU CONTINUE MONITORING THEIR ACTIVITIES. IF THEY START TO COME IN THIS DIRECTION, SEND A STRIDER SQUADRON TO INTERCEPT THEM.

SO, THEY HAVE COME AT LAST, HAVE THEY? I KNEW IT WOULD HAPPEN SOONER OR LATER.

AFTER ALL, ONE OUTWORLDER COMING TO OUR LANDS HAD TO MEAN OTHERS WOULD FOLLOW. BUT WHY HAS IT TAKEN SO LONG?

MOMENTS LATER, IN HER PRIVATE CHAMBERS...

HURRY! HURRY, YOU STUPID COWS! I HAVE NO TIME TO DALLY.

AND HAVE A CARE HOW YOU HANDLE THAT GOWN, UNLESS YOU CRAVE ANOTHER FLOGGING!

AND, WITHIN MINUTES...

FORGIVE MY INTRUSION ON THY HOUR OF REST, HUSBAND, BUT I WOULD BEG A WORD WITH THEE.

OF COURSE, BELOVED.

HOW COULD AN OLD MAN FIND EVEN THE SLIGHTEST OBJECTION TO SHARING A QUIET MOMENT WITH HIS BEAUTIFUL YOUNG WIFE AND WONDERFUL SON.

IT IS *YOU* WHO HAVE MADE *NATHANIEL RICHARDS* THE HAPPIEST MAN ON ALL THIS TROUBLED EARTH!

NEXT ISSUE: REUNION OR RUINATION? BE HERE FOR...

FATHERS and OTHERS

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FATHER-- YOU'RE THE WARLORD?!

FAMILY REUNION!

Stan Lee PRESENTS:

FATHERS and OTHERS

THE PLACE: THE PLANET EARTH.
THE TIME: THE PRESENT.

BUT NEITHER *OUR EARTH* NOR *OUR PRESENT*. LOOK CLOSELY, AND GROW WISE...

THAR 'TIS, RICHARDS. THE WARLORD'S FORT!

JOHN BYRNE / GLYNIS WEIN / MICHAEL CARLIN / JIM SHOOTER
WORDS + PICTURES — COLORING — EDITING — OTHER

FORTRESS WOULD SEEM A MORE ACCURATE DESCRIPTION, COLBY, AND YOU SAY THIS "WARLORD" BUILT THIS STRONGHOLD TEN YEARS AGO?

WAL, NOT EXAC'LY. TEN YEARS IS HOW LONG IT'S BIN SINCE TH' WARLORD STARTED ADDIN' ON TUH IT, BUT TH' ORIGINAL BUILDIN' IS ONE A' THEM *OLD PLACES.*

"OLD PLACES?" NOW, WHAT EXACTLY DOES THAT MEAN, COLBY?

AH CAIN'T RIGHTLY SAY F'R SURE, MA'M, NOT BEIN' MUCH OF A ONE F'R STUDYIN' UP ON *HIST'RY* AN' TH' LIKE. BUT THAR'S PLACES 'ROUND THESE PARTS GO BACK A LONG WAYS.

LONGER 'AN ANYTHIN'S BIN WRIT DOWN ABOUT IT, SOME FOLKS SAY.

BOY, THIS PLACE GETS MORE MYSTERIOUS BY THE MINUTE. WE COME HERE LOOKING FOR REED'S DAD, AND WE FIND COWBOYS AND GIANT WAR-MACHINES!

HARDLY A NATURAL MIXTURE, EH, JOHNNY? BUT, THEN, REED WARNED US WE WOULD BE TRAVELING INTO AN *ALTERNATE REALITY*, SO I SUPPOSE NOTHING SHOULD REALLY SURPRISE US!

THAT'S EASY FOR YOU TO SAY, WYATT. YOU'VE SPENT SOME TIME HANGING AROUND WITH THE *FANTASTIC FOUR* BEFORE. I'M JUST A ONE-TIME LADY-LAWYER.

WHO ALSO HAPPENS TO HAVE BEEN A FULL-TIME *AVENGER*. I DON'T THINK YOUR PAST EXPLOITS HAVE BEEN QUITE AS TAME AS YOU'D...

HOLD UP, EV'BODY!

LOOKIE THAR!

WHERE

ANOTHER ONE OF THOSE H.G. WELLS STYLE TRIPODS. THE WARLORD'S PROBABLY GOT 'EM STATIONED ALL AROUND HERE AS AN OUTER DEFENSE PERIMETER!

BUT THEY WON'T STOP ME!!

FLAME ON!

CAREFUL, JOHNNY! REMEMBER! THOSE THINGS CAN COUNTER YOUR POWER!

DON'T SWEAT IT, SIS. I HAVEN'T FORGOTTEN WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE...*

BUT THIS TIN TITAN IS ABOUT TO LEARN THE *HUMAN TORCH* DOESN'T FALL FOR THE SAME GAG *TWICE!!*

*LAST ISSUE.

WITH THAT, JOHNNY STORM ARCS HIGH OVER THE DESERT...

OKAY, NOW LET'S FIND OUT IF I'M AS TOUGH AS I SOUND.

LAST TIME THE FIRST TRIPOD WE BUMPED INTO KNOCKED ME OUT OF THE BOX BY CARBONIZING THE AIR AROUND ME, SMOTHERING MY FLAME. LOOKS LIKE THEY'RE GONNA TRY THE SAME TRICK!

BUT FIRST THEY'LL HAVE TO FIGURE OUT WHICH TORCH IS THE REAL McCOY...

...INSTEAD OF ONE OF THE DUPLICATES I MADE OUT OF FLAME.

FASTER THAN HUMAN EYES CAN FOLLOW, THE FLAMING IMAGES DART AROUND THE MACHINE...

IT'S WORKING! NOW, WHILE THEY'RE DISTRACTED...

SUDDENLY HIS COSMIC RAY ALTERED CELLS BOOST THEIR ENERGY ONE HUNDRED-FOLD...

YA-HOO! WITHOUT THEIR TRICKS SLOWING ME DOWN I CRIPPLED THEM EASILY!

MEANWHILE, NOT TEN MILES AWAY...

FOOLS!

STUPID, INCOMPETENT FOOLS! YOUR INTELLIGENCE HAS BEEN INCREASED MANY TIMES OVER, YET YOU ARE STILL NO SMARTER THAN YOUR APE ANCESTORS!

A THOUSAND PARDONS, MISTRESS! THE CREW OF THE STRIDER DID THE BEST THEY COULD. PERHAPS IT IS TIME TO NOTIFY HIS LORDSHIP?

NO! THIS MATTER IS FAR TOO TRIVIAL TO DISTURB HIS GREAT MUSINGS. IT IS UP TO YOU TO CAPTURE THESE OUTWORLDERS!

YES, MISTRESS. WE SHALL NOT FAIL YOU!

SEE TO IT THAT YOU DON'T, GONT, OR I SHALL BE PLEASED TO COMMAND THE RACK-MASTER TO CREATE A MOST PROLONGED AND PAINFUL DEMISE FOR YOU,'

LOOK AT THEM QUIVER.' THEY FEAR ME -- AND RIGHTLY SO. THEY KNOW MINE IS NOT THE SOFT, FORGIVING HAND OF MY DEAR HUSBAND -- PITIFUL OLD FOOL THAT HE HAS BECOME.'

MEANWHILE...

WELL, THAT SHOULD TAKE CARE OF THAT!

I PULLED THE PILOTS OUT OF THE FIRST OF THESE WE KNOCKED OUT...

RUNG!

GOOD WORK, JOHNNY. AND NOW, SHE-HULK...?

GOT IT, REED.

I CAN DO THE SAME WITH THIS ONE...

BUT...

NO GO, REED. THE CONTROL CABIN IS THERE, JUST LIKE IN THE OTHER ONE, BUT NOBODY'S HOME.

HM! NOT SURPRISING. WE WERE A HUNDRED MILES FROM HERE WHEN THE OTHER TRI-POD ATTACKED AT THIS CLOSER RANGE OUR UNKNOWN FRIENDS IN THE FORTRESS APPARENTLY PREFER OPERATING THEIR FIRST STRING OF DEFENSE BY REMOTE-CONTROL.

"FIRST STRING," DARLING? I TAKE IT YOU EXPECT THERE'LL BE OTHERS?

OH, MOST ASSUREDLY, SUE, ALTHOUGH, IN THIS CONFUSED WORLD, I CANNOT GUESS WHAT FORM THEY MAY TAKE.

POSSIBLY SOMETHING LIKE **THEM**, REED?

LOOKS LIKE SOME KINDA FLYING MACHINES -- SMALL ONES THOUGH. GREAT! AT LAST SOMETHING I CAN FIGHT ON MY TURF!

WAIT A MOMENT, JOHNNY. FROM THE DIRECTION OF THEIR APPROACH I'D SAY IT'S POSSIBLE THEY'RE NOT PART OF THE WARLORD'S DEFENSES.

SUE, LET'S TRY A DEFENSIVE APPROACH THIS TIME. READY WITH YOUR INVISIBLE FORCE FIELD?

READY, MY LOVE!

AROUND THEM THE AIR ITSELF SEEMS TO HARDEN AS THE UNSEEN ENERGIES FLOW FORTH...

BUT...

THEY'RE NOT MAKING ANY HOSTILE MOVES -- JUST CHECKING US OUT...

BOY! THE RIDE OF THE VALKYRIE WAS NEVER LIKE *THIS!*

AND THEN...

GREETINGS TO YOU ALL. YOU ARE STRANGERS IN THESE LANDS. ARE YOU FRIEND OR FOE TO THE ACCURSED WARLORD?

WELL... FROM THE WAY YOU PHRASE YOUR QUESTION I SUSPECT WE WOULD BE PLACING OURSELVES AT HAZARD IF WE EVEN ADMITTED TO A CASUAL ACQUAINTANCE WITH THE GENTLEMAN. HOWEVER, SINCE WE HAVE BEEN TWICE ATTACKED BY HIS FORCES I THINK I AM SAFE TO SAY WE ARE MORE HIS FOES THAN HIS FRIENDS. MY NAME'S RICHARDS, AND THESE...

RICHARDS!

THIEVING, MURDERING SWINE!! BY MY BLADE YOU *DIE*!!

THE ATTACK IS BLINDINGLY SWIFT, ALMOST CATCHING REED RICHARDS UNAWARES.

WHAT IN THE WORLD...

BUT FAST AS THE ATTACK IS, IT IS NOT FASTER THAN THE BATTLE-HONED REFLEXES OF THE MAN SO RIGHTLY CALLED *MISTER FANTASTIC!*

NOW JUST SLOW DOWN, YOUNG LADY. I HAVEN'T EVEN BEEN ON THIS PLANET OF YOURS LONG ENOUGH TO DESERVE SUCH TREATMENT!

LIAR! ROGUE! RELEASE ME, OR MY SISTERS WILL HACK YOU APART!

I DON'T THINK SO, AS LONG AS I'M HOLDING YOU LIKE THIS, I SHOULD EXPECT THEY'D BE MORE INCLINED TOWARD CONVERSATION.

DO NOT HEED HIM, SISTERS! HE IS THE LIVING SCION OF THE DEVIL HIMSELF! ATTACK! DESTROY THE MONSTER!

NO!

HOLD YOUR TONGUE A WHILE, MY DAUGHTER. ALTHOUGH THERE BE MUCH ABOUT THIS STRANGER THAT BESPEAKS THE WARLORD'S BLOOD, YET DID HE SAY OPENLY THE MOST HATED NAME, AS IF HE KNEW NOT THE TRUE NATURE OF WHAT HE SPOKE.

I THANK YOU, MA'M, FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT.

MOTHER! NO! NO! YOU CANNOT FALL VICTIM TO HIS LIES!!

ENOUGH, CHILD. REMEMBER WHO I AM. YOU OVER-STEP YOUR PLACE TO SPEAK THUS TO YOUR QUEEN, FLESH OF MY FLESH THOUGH YOU MAY BE.

ONE-CALLED RICHARDS, IF YOU WILL NOW RELEASE MY DAUGHTER, THERE IS MUCH WE MUST SPEAK ABOUT!

THUS, A FEW MINUTES LATER, A DISCRETE DISTANCE FROM THE WARLORD'S KEEP...

I CONFESS TO BEING SOMEWHAT OUT OF MY DEPTH, YOUR MAJESTY. WE KNEW WE WERE GOING TO ARRIVE ON A WORLD *PARALLEL* TO OUR OWN...

...BUT I EXPECTED TO ENCOUNTER CULTURES MORE CLOSELY APPROXIMATING THOSE OF OUR OWN YEAR OF 1984.

YOUR SYSTEM OF DATING IS OF NO MEANING HERE, I'M AFRAID. WE HAVE FOR MANY CENTURIES BEEN THE KEEPERS OF THE CALENDAR. TO US THIS IS 1127.

"THAT DATE WE TAKE FROM THE FIRST TIME MEN OF THIS WORLD WENT OUT TO WALK UPON THE FACE OF EARTH'S LOST SISTER, THE MOON.

"OUR STORIES, CAREFULLY HANDED DOWN FROM ONE GENERATION TO THE NEXT, BESPEAK A TIME OF GREAT PEACE, AS THE LUNAR COLONY GREW AND PROSPERED.

LUNA I

"THEN CAME A DAY WHEN *LUNA* DECLARED THAT SHE'D BE FOREVER INDEPENDANT OF *TERRA* -- AND THEN BEGAN THE *GREAT WAR!*

IRIS

"IT LASTED ONLY SIX OF THE OLD MONTHS, BEFORE THE REBELS, IN SUICIDAL DESPERATION, EXPLODED THEIR MOST FANTASTIC OF WEAPONS -- AND SHATTERED THE VERY WORLD THEY FOUGHT TO SAVE.

"FOR TEN LONG YEARS THE BROKEN FRAGMENTS FORMED A TERRIBLE CLOUD ABOUT THE EARTH, A CLOUD THAT BLOCKED THE LIFE-GIVING RAYS OF THE SUN, AND PLUNGED THE PLANET INTO ETERNAL WINTER.

"AND THAT WAS NOT THE WORST OF IT. EACH YEARLY SOJOURN AROUND THE SUN CARRIED THE EARTH THROUGH THE GRAVITATIONAL INFLUENCES OF THE OTHER PLANETS.

"WITH EVERY SEASON THE ORBITING DEBRIS ROLLED AND JOSTLED AGAINST ITSELF, AND MOUNTAINS RAINED DAILY FROM THE TROUBLED SKIES.

"CIVILIZATION, LIKE THE CONTINENTS THEMSELVES, WAS SHATTERED.

"YET, MIRACULOUSLY, LIFE ITSELF SURVIVED -- HUMANKIND CONTINUED TO CLING TO THE EARTH.

"DIVIDED INTO ISOLATED POCKETS, GROPING IN HALF-FORGOTTEN MEMORY--PART SCIENCE, PART LEGEND, PART FANTASY--THE SURVIVORS REBUILT THEIR LIVES AND THEIR WORLDS.

"BUT, AS THEY STROVE TO RECAPTURE ANCIENT GLORY, SO DID THEY REKINDLE THE FIRES OF ANCIENT FOLLY.

"TWO CENTURIES OF COLD, HARD PEACE ENDED IN THE FIERY BLOSSOM OF WAR!

"AND, INTO THAT WORLD, SO BENT UPON FINAL SELF-DESTRUCTION, ONE DAY CAME A STRANGER.

"THE WARLORD!

"TRUTH BE TOLD, HE DID NOT, IN THOSE EARLY DAYS, USE THAT THRICE-CURSED NAME. TO THOSE BOLD ENOUGH TO ASK HE SAID HE WAS SIMPLY *A SCIENTIST.*

"FOR MANY MONTHS HE WANDERED OUR WAR-TORN LANDS, HELPING TO EASE THE SUFFERINGS OF THOSE TRUSTING ENOUGH TO ACCEPT HIS AID.

"AT LAST HE CAME TO THE HIGH CRAGS WHERE MY PEOPLE MAKE THEIR HOMES. WE WOULD NOT LET HIM WITHIN THE WALLS OF OUR EYRIE, AND SO HE CAMPED OUTSIDE, MAKING NO HOSTILE MOVE AGAINST US.

" UNTIL AT LAST HE WON OUR TRUST, AND I WENT OUT TO MEET WITH HIM.

"HE SAID HE RECOGNIZED IN THE HIGH CULTURE OF MY PEOPLE THE ONLY CHANCE OF SURVIVAL FOR HUMANKIND.

"HE TOLD ME OF THE COUNTLESS WONDERS OF SCIENCE THAT WE COULD CLAIM AS OUR OWN, WITH HIS HELP.

"SO COMPELLING WAS THE PASSION WITH WHICH HE SPOKE THAT I BELIEVED HIM, AND HE JOINED MY PEOPLE AS AN EQUAL.

"SO MUCH SO, THAT BY YEAR'S END I HAD BOUND HIM TO MY FAMILY THROUGH A CEREMONIAL MARRIAGE TO MY YOUNGEST DAUGHTER, AFTER THE CUSTOM OF MY PEOPLE.

"THEN HE DESIGNED, AND SUPERVISED CONSTRUCTION OF, OUR WONDROUS SKY-STEEDS.

"THUS DID WE SET OUT TO BRING NEW HOPE, FIRST TO OUR TROUBLED LAND, THEN TO THE FARTHEST CORNERS OF THE WORLD.

"IT WAS NOT AN EASY TASK. THE LONG RAIN OF THE SHATTERED MOON HAD BROKEN THE ONCE MIGHTY CONTINENTS INTO GREAT ARCHIPELAGOES, STRINGS OF ISLANDS, MANY COMPLETELY UNAWARE OF THE EXISTANCE OF THE REST OF THE WORLD.

"ON ONE LARGE ISLAND WE FOUND THE RUINS OF ONE OF THE *OLD PLACES* -- A STRUCTURE THAT HAD SURVIVED ALMOST INTACT FROM THE LOST YEARS BEFORE THE LUNAR WAR. THE SCIENTIST WAS DELIGHTED. HE SAID THE OLD MACHINES COULD BE RESTORED.

"WE LEFT HIM WITH A LABOR FORCE OF THE APE-LIKE MUTATES WE HAD FOUND IN THE SOUTHERN REGIONS, AND WENT ON TO CONTINUE OUR GRAND CRUSADE.

"IT WOULD BE THREE LONG YEARS BEFORE WE RETURNED.

"WE FOUND MUCH HAD CHANGED. THE ONCE-ALTRUISTIC *SCIENTIST* HAD BECOME THE CONQUERING *WARLORD*, THE ANCIENT CITADEL OF KNOWLEDGE WAS NOW A *FORTRESS*, THE COUNTRY AROUND IT A BURNED-OUT WAR-ZONE.

WE QUICKLY LEARNED THAT THE SCIENTIST HAD COMPLETED HIS RESTORATIONS OF THE CITADEL, AND THEN, WITHOUT WARNING, SUDDENLY, AND SAVAGELY STRUCK AT THE NEARBY TOWNSITES.

HE HAD DECLARED HIMSELF RULER OF ALL THE WORLD -- AND SHOWN IN ONE FELL SWOOP THAT HE HAD THE POWER TO MAKE GOOD HIS DECLARATION.

THIS IS INCREDIBLE! IT ALL SOUNDS LIKE A HISTORY OF THE EARTH, AS IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN IF THE *DARK AGES* HAD NOT OCCURRED! FANTASTIC!

THAT IS PRECICELY WHAT IT IS, WYATT. HERE THE SO-CALLED "*GREAT INTERRUPTION*" -- THE ALMOST TOTAL DISAPPEARANCE OF SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY FROM ROUGHLY 300 A.D. TO 1300 A.D. -- ALL THAT WASTED HISTORY WAS HERE FILLED WITH THE GREAT LEAPS OF EXPLORATION AND DISCOVERY WHICH ON OUR EARTH DID NOT OCCUR UNTIL THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES!

IT NEVER CEASES TO AMAZE ME HOW NOTHING SEEMS TO TAKE REED BY SURPRISE -- HE'S ALWAYS READY WITH AN ANSWER!

UNFORTUNATELY, THAT HISTORY ALSO CONFIRMS A FACT I HAVE BEEN FIGHTING AGAINST IN MY MIND ALMOST FROM THE MOMENT WE ARRIVED: THE WARLORD... /S MY FATHER!

OH, REED! WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO?

"WE ARE GOING TO DO NOTHING, FOR THE MOMENT," REPLIES REED RICHARDS. "I AM GOING TO GO OUT THERE, ONTO THE PLAIN, ALONE..."

I MUST REACH THE CITADEL, OPENLY, WITHOUT ANY HINT OF AGRESSION. MINE MUST BE THE PATH OF *REASON*.

THAT, AND THAT ALONE WILL BE MY ONLY CHANNEL, MY ONLY HOPE OF REACHING HIM...

YET, EVEN NOW, EVEN IN THE FACE OF SUCH INSURMOUNTABLE FACT...

...I CLING TO THE HOPE THAT THIS MAD WARLORD, IS NOT TRULY MY FATHER!

AS MISTER FANTASTIC MAKES HIS WAY ACROSS THE BATTLE-BLASTED PLAIN FRAGMENTARY IMAGES FLOAT ACROSS HIS MIND, TEASING, TANTALIZING, BURSTING AGAINST HIS CONSCIOUSNESS LIKE THE BUBBLES OF SOME POTENT FAERIE BREW...

RICHARDS

IT ALL SEEMS SO UTTERLY PREPOSTEROUS. WE TRAVELED FROM NEW YORK TO CALIFORNIA, SEEKING CLUES TO THE GAPS I'VE DISCOVERED IN MY MEMORY.

INSTEAD OF ANSWERS WE'VE FOUND ONLY MORE QUESTIONS, GREATER SURPRISES -- THE DISCOVERY THAT MY FATHER BUILT THE FIRST FUNCTIONING *TIME PLATFORM* YEARS AGO.

FOLLOWING HIM BROUGHT US TO THIS STRANGE *OTHER-EARTH*, AND A SERIES OF INESCAPABLE CONCLUSIONS THAT LEAD TO AN UNTENABLE CONTRADICTION. HOW COULD MY FATHER HAVE CHANGED SO?

BUT, BEFORE REED CAN TURN HIS KEENLY ANALYTICAL MIND TO THIS FRUSTRATING CONUNDRUM...

HALT! WHO GOES THERE?

MY NAME IS RICHARDS. I HAVE URGENT BUSINESS WITH THE WARLORD.

I *DEMAND* TO BE ALLOWED TO SPEAK WITH HIM *IMMEDIATELY!*

SUDDENLY...

YOU ARE IN A POSITION TO DEMAND NOTHING, OUTWORLDER. STATE YOUR BUSINESS-- *QUICKLY!*

THERE'S A FUZZING EFFECT TO THE SPEAKER IN WHATEVER IS PROJECTING THIS IMAGE. I CAN'T TELL IF THAT'S REALLY MY FATHER'S VOICE.

I SHOULD HAVE THOUGHT MY BUSINESS WOULD BE IMMEDIATELY OBVIOUS...

OR DOES THE GREAT WARLORD NOT RECOGNIZE HIS OWN SON?

MY... SON...?

YES. I WAS ONLY IN MY TWENTIES. THE LAST TIME I SAW YOU, BUT SURELY I HAVEN'T CHANGED SO MUCH THAT YOU NO LONGER KNOW ME?

FROM THE EARLIEST YEARS OF MY LIFE -- YEARS I CAN NO LONGER REMEMBER WITH THEIR FORMER CLARITY, BUT WHOSE EMOTIONAL IMPACT IS UNDIMINISHED --

YOU WERE SO MUCH MORE THAN A FATHER TO ME. YOU WERE MY TEACHER, MY GUIDE, AS TOGETHER WE ROLLED BACK THE FRONTIERS OF SCIENCE.

MY YOUTH WAS ONE LONG, UNENDING ADVENTURE, AS YOU OPENED MY EYES TO THE WONDERS OF THE UNIVERSE THE VASTNESS OF OUTER SPACE...

...AND THE BOUNDLESS COMPLEXITY OF THE MICROVERSE -- THE ALMOST MAGICAL REALM OF SUB-ATOMIC STRUCTURE.

YOU CREATED IN MY MIND AN INSATIABLE HUNGER, AN UNDYING NEED TO COMPREHEND EVER FACET OF CREATION.

YET YOU INSTILLED IN ME ALSO THE COMMON SENSE TO REALIZE THE DANGERS THAT LAY SIDE BY SIDE WITH NEW KNOWLEDGE -- THE DANGERS OF ANY SCIENCE PERVERTED!

IS *THIS* HOW YOU DEMONSTRATE YOUR OWN BELIEF IN ALL THE THINGS YOU TAUGHT ME -- BY TURNING THIS ALREADY TROUBLED WORLD INTO A PLAYGROUND FOR YOUR OWN VANITY?

YOU ASK MANY QUESTIONS.

HERE, THEN, IS MY ANSWER...

UH OH...

LOOKS LIKE THINGS JUST GOT REAL *NASTY* AT THE FAMILY REUNION!

EVERYONE -- WE'VE GOT TO HELP REED!

WHAT FOLLOWS IS THE BLOODIEST BATTLE THE MEMBERS OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR HAVE EVER FOUND THEMSELVES INVOLVED IN...

MORE THAN A BATTLE, IN FACT, IT IS A FULL-FLEDGED *WAR* THAT NOW EXPLODES ACROSS THESE ALREADY DEVASTATED ACRES.

AND WHAT A WAR! THE MANY FACETS OF THE SEPARATE CULTURES CLASH LIKE SOME SURREALIST NIGHTMARE.

THE WORLDS OF H.G. WELLS AND J.R.R. TOLKIEN SMASH HEADLONG AGAINST THOSE OF RICHARD WAGNER AND ZANE GREY.

COUNTER-CULTURES COLLIDE, AND STRIVE BY THEIR COLLISION TO ANNIHILATE EACH OTHER.

AND, IN THE VERY HEART OF BLAZING BATTLE THE FANTASTIC FOUR STRIVE TO RESTORE ORDER AND PEACE!

MEANWHILE...

THIS BATTLE HAS BEEN WAY OUT OF MY LEAGUE FOR SOME HOURS NOW. PERHAPS I CAN BE OF MORE USE IF I GET CLOSER TO THE CITADEL...

SUMMONING ALL THE STEALTH OF HIS NOBLE FOREBEARS, WYATT WINGFOOT BLENDS INTO THE BROKEN LANDSCAPE, AND...

LUCK IS WITH ME. ALL CONCENTRATION IS FOCUSED ON THE BATTLE BELOW. I SHOULD BE ABLE...

WAIT!

WHAT'S THIS? THE WAR-LORD HIMSELF COME OUT TO JOIN THE FRAY? WHAT IS HE SAYING...?

CAREFUL, FOOLS! THE TIDE OF BATTLE IS TURNING AGAINST US. THIS *ANTI-MATTER* CANNON IS OUR ONE CHANCE TO END IT QUICKLY AND WITH VICTORY FOR OUR FORCES.

DAMAGE IT AND I SHALL SEE YOU ALL FLAYED ALIVE IF IT IS THE LAST THING I EVER DO!! MOVE!

PLEASANT SOUL. BUT WHAT WAS THAT ABOUT *ANTI-MATTER*? IF SUCH A DEVICE WAS USED...

...I MUST FIND A WAY... YES. THIS ROCK IS THE RIGHT SIZE. BUT MY TIMING WILL HAVE TO BE *PERFECT*...

DEEP WITHIN THE AWESOME WEAPON THE SHRILL WHINE OF DESTRUCTION RISES TO A FEVER PITCH...

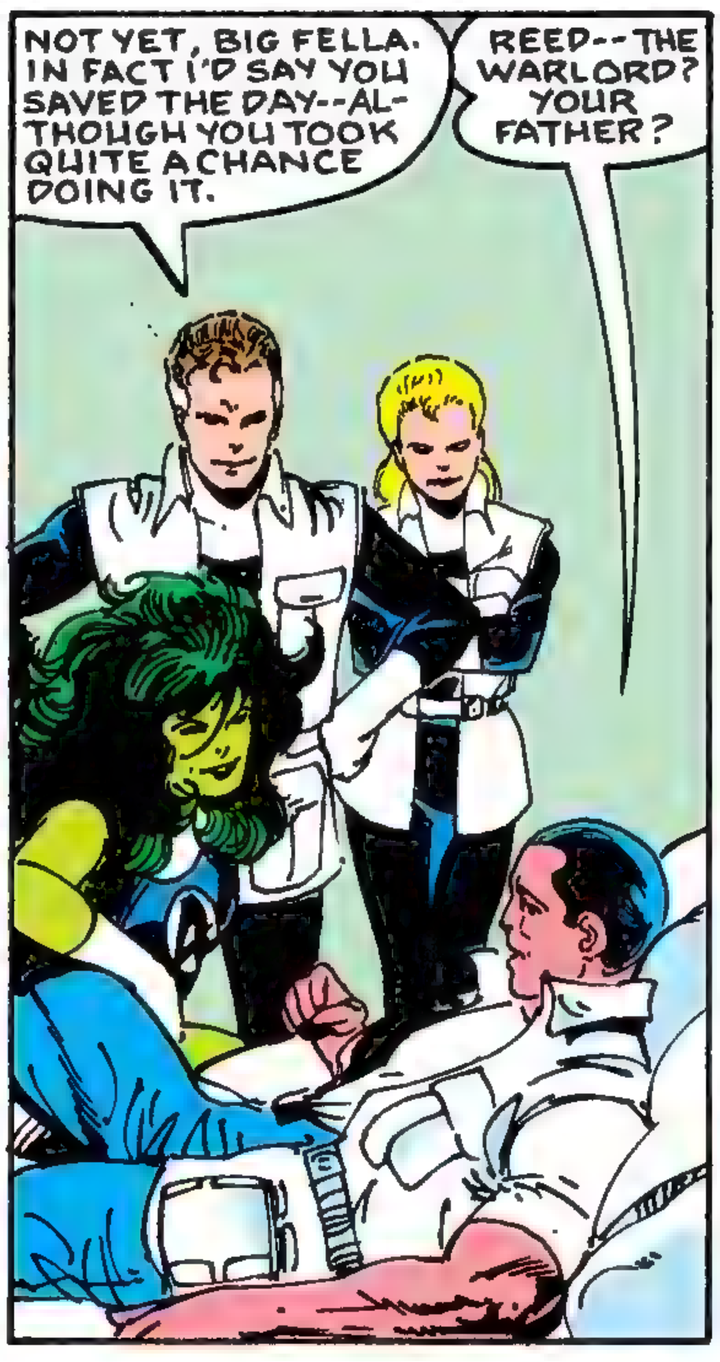
...AND, AT THE LAST POSSIBLE SECOND...

SHUK

OBLIVION...

...OF A KIND...

WYATT?



YOU SEE, I NEVER *WAS* THE WARLORD, MISTER WINGFOOT. JUST A FOOLISH OLD MAN TOO QUICK TO CLING TO THE FANTASIES OTHERS HAD MANUFACTURED FOR HIM--

TOO QUICK TO BELIEVE HIS BEAUTIFUL YOUNG WIFE HAD ACTUALLY COME TO LOVE HIM AS MUCH AS HE CHERISHED HER.

I ALWAYS TRIED TO TEACH REED TO LEARN AND REMEMBER THE LESSONS OF HISTORY, YET I HAVE FAILED TO HEED MY OWN GOOD ADVICE.

LIKE THE EMPEROR CLAUDIUS BLINDED HIMSELF TO THE WICKED WAYS OF HIS WIFE MESSALINA, AS MACBETH FELL VICTIM TO THE CONSUMING AMBITIONS OF HIS WIFE...

SO I LET MYSELF ACCEPT WITHOUT QUESTION THE LIES OF MY SWEET CASSANDRA, AND INSTEAD OF BRINGING TO THIS POOR WORLD THE NEW GOLDEN AGE I HAD ENVISIONED, SHE USED MY SCIENCE TO AMASS POWER FOR HERSELF--TO BECOME THE HATED WARLORD. NOW... SHE IS... GONE.

YOU MUSTN'T BE SO HARD ON YOURSELF, FATHER. YOU ARE STILL HALE AND FIT. YOU HAVE TIME TO MAKE AMENDS, TO REBUILD.

PERHAPS. THERE IS MUCH WISDOM IN WHAT YOU SAY, SON. I ALWAYS KNEW YOU WOULD BE A FINE MAN, THAT YOU WOULD MAKE ME PROUD.

THEN... YOU WON'T BE RETURNING WITH US, SIR? YOU WON'T BE COMING BACK TO OUR OWN EARTH?

NO, JOHNNY. I WISH I COULD. IT WOULD BE WONDERFUL TO SEE ALL THE MARVELS THAT HAVE COME INTO YOUR WORLD SINCE I LEFT IT--NOT THE LEAST OF WHICH WOULD BE THE GRANDSON REED AND SUE HAVE TOLD ME I NOW HAVE.

BUT... MY PLACE IS HERE. CASSANDRA MAY HAVE WORN MY ARMOR, AND SPOKEN AS IF WITH MY VOICE, BUT SHE ALSO GAVE ME A FINE BABY SON, AND THIS IS HIS WORLD...

I OWE IT TO HIM TO MAKE OF IT EVERYTHING IT *SHOULD* BE. AND THIS TIME -- *THIS TIME* -- I SHALL NOT FAIL THAT TRUST.

EPILOG: THE YEAR 3000... THE GLORIOUS AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT, THE CENTURY OF PEACE AND PROGRESS. THE ULTIMATE IN CIVILIZATION AND CULTURE.

AND FOR ONE MAN AT LEAST, A MOST HATED TIME. FOR HE THINKS HIMSELF A MAN OF ADVENTURE, AND THERE ARE NO ADVENTURES IN THE YEAR 3000, NO ENEMIES TO BATTLE, NO DRAGONS TO SLAY.

WHY WAS I BORN INTO AN AGE WHEN THE ONLY EXCITEMENT A MAN CAN FIND IS IN WATCHING 3-D STEREOVISIONS FROM A THOUSAND YEARS AGO?!!

THEN, ONE DAY THIS MALCONTENT VISITS THE RUINS LEFT BY A MOST REMARKABLE ANCESTOR...

THESE LANDS HAVE BEEN A NATIONAL SHRINE FOR A THOUSAND YEARS... YET IT ALL STILL BELONGS TO MY FAMILY. PERHAPS HERE I WILL FIND SOME RELEASE!

PROWLING THE LONG EMPTY HALLS HE FINDS ONE LONG-SEALED CHAMBER, AND FORCING THE DOOR DISCOVERS...

MY ANCESTOR'S GREATEST INVENTION! A TIME-MACHINE! PART OF THE MACHINE REMAINS, AND HERE ARE THE PLANS FOR ITS OPERATION.

IT WOULD BE SIMPLE FOR ME TO RECREATE IT, AND USE IT FOR MY OWN PURPOSES!

HE DEVOTES YEARS TO THE BUILDING OF THAT MACHINE, AND KNOWING THE SUPERSTITIOUS BELIEFS OF PEOPLE IN BYGONE DAYS, HE SHAPES IT IN THE FORM OF A STRANGE CREATURE, AN IDOL!

THEN, AT LAST, HE PLUNGES INTO THE DISTANT PAST, TO ANCIENT EGYPT, WHERE HIS VAST SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE WILL MAKE HIM THE ABSOLUTE RULER OF MANKIND!*

*LONG-TIME READERS ARE BOUND TO BE SURPRISED BY THIS REVELATION, THOUGH NEW-COMERS MAY BE CONFUSED. BUT WORRY NOT, FOR ALL WILL BE MADE CLEAR IN AN UPCOMING **AVENGERS** SAGA!

NEXT ISSUE:

A LOOK AT HOW **THE THING** IS GETTING ALONG (CONTINUED FROM **THE THING** #19--SO BUY THAT FIRST!) PLUS LOTS MORE SURPRISES FOR THE **FF** IN--

MONSTER MASH!

MARVEL

THE THING

TM

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GOING MY WAY?

NIGHTMARES!

WILSON · SINNOTT

MONSTER MASH

TERRIFIC.

FOLLOWIN' MY NOSE HAS GOT ME INTA SOME MISERABLE PLACES ON THIS PLANET, BUT THIS JUST ABOUT TAKES TH' CAKE. LOOKS LIKE I WANDERED ONTO AN' OL' *UNIVERSAL* BACK-LOT.

IT ALL LOOKS LIKE ONE A' THEM HORROR MOVIES THAT USED TA GIVE ME THE CREEPIN' CRAWLIES WHEN I WAS A KID. LUCKY I AIN'T A KID NO MORE...

AIN'T IT...?

ROCKY GRIMM
PART IX
SPACE RANGER

*THE WORLD LOOKS MUCH LIKE EARTH, MUCH LIKE THE FOG-ENSHROUDED VALLEYS THAT WORM THEIR WAY THROUGH THE BALKANS, THROUGH DARK LANDS WITH EVEN DARKER NAMES, **TRANSYLVANIA, LATVERIA...***

*SHIVERING AGAINST THE CLINGING DAMP **BEN GRIMM** WONDERS IF HE WOULD BE WRONG TO BE A LITTLE AFRAID.*

JOHN BYRNE SCRIPTER | RON WILSON BREAKDOWNS | MIKE GUSTOVICH FINISHES | BOB SHAREN COLORIST | NOVAK & SQUID LETTERERS | MICHAEL CARLIN EDITOR | JIM SHOOTER EDITOR IN CHIEF

FACE IT, BENJY-BOY. YOU SURE CAN PICK 'EM. THIS PLANET IS A CRAZY-QUILT OF JUST ABOUT EVERY KINDA PLACE YOU'D CARE TA THINK OF. SOME OF 'EM HAVE GOTTA BE SOMETHIN' LIKE PARADISE.

BUT YOU AIN'T EXACTLY FOUND A WHOLE MESSA THEM, SO FAR, HAVE YA? SO FAR, IT SEEMS LIKE YOU'VE BEEN TAKIN' A TRIP THROUGH YER OWN WORST NIGHTMARES.

IT'S FUNNY. ***REED*** HINTED THAT MY OWN PSYCHE MIGHT BE IN CONTROL A' THIS JOINT, MAKIN' TH' WORLD DO WHATEVER I "TOLD" IT TA DO. HE FIGGERED THAT WUZ WHAT WUZ GOIN' ON DURIN' THEM ***SECRET WARS.****

BUT SO FAR I AIN'T SEEN NOTHIN' THAT LOOKS LIKE SOMETHIN' I'D ***WANT*** TA SEE, WANT TA CONJURE UP. IT'S ALL JUST...

*SEE THE ***MARVEL SUPER HEROES: SECRET WARS*** 12-ISSUE LIMITED SERIES. ISSUE #9 ON SALE NOW.

WHAT IN THE NAME A...!?!

WHOA BOYS! WHOA I SAY!

HOLY!

ANY OTHER MAN MIGHT HAVE BEEN HELPLESSLY TRAMPLED BENEATH THE THUNDERING HOOVES, GIVEN SO LITTLE TIME TO REACT.

BUT BEN GRIMM IS NOT ***ANY*** MAN.

IF HE WERE, IF HE HAD NOT HAD HIS INSTINCTS, HIS REACTIONS HONED BY YEARS ON THE RAZOR-EDGE OF DANGER...

...BEN GRIMM COULD NOT EXECUTE THE LITHE, CONTROLLED TUMBLE THAT FLIPS HIM OUT OF THE WAY OF THE STRANGE VEHICLE...

...AND BRINGS HIM TO HIS FEET, FUMING.

AWRIGHT, BRIGHT BOY, YOU BETTER DO SOME FANCY...

A THOUSAND PARDONS, GOOD SIR. I DID NOT EXPECT TO FIND ANYONE ABOUT ON THIS ROAD, AT THIS HOUR. YOU MUST BE A BRAVE MAN INDEED TO VENTURE SO FAR INTO THE WOODS ON SUCH A NIGHT.

SIR?

NEVER MIND.

LOOK, AS LONG AS YER ALL APOLOGETIC, CAN I HITCH A LIFT? THIS CRATE A' YOURS AIN'T EXACTLY NO TAXI, BUT I AIN'T EXACTLY IN THE MOOD TA BE FUSSY, EITHER.

OF COURSE, SIR. I WOULD BE HAPPY TO ACCOMODATE YOU...

YEAH, WELL I DON'T SUPPOSE IT'D MAKE ANY SENSE T' YOU IF I SAID HALF AN HOUR BACK I WUZ WALKING ACROSS GREEN FIELDS, WITH NOT A TREE IN SIGHT?

„ROOM FOR *ONE*, INSIDE, SIR.

THE LINE--FROM AN OLD HORROR STORY--SENDS A DAGGER OF ICE THROUGH BEN. SUDDENLY ALL HIS SENSES TELL HIM THIS IS NOT A GOOD PLACE TO BE.

THE FOG SEEMS ALMOST TO SLAP AGAINST HIS BARE LEGS AS HE RUNS, THE HIDDEN ROOTS SEEM ALMOST TO SHIFT, AS IF TRYING TO ENTANGLE HIM.

BUT RUN HE DOES...

AND WITH GOOD REASON.

THE ACCOMODATING DRIVER OF THE BIZARRE VEHICLE SEEMS SUDDENLY LESS FRIENDLY.

FASTER, ME BEAUTIES! *FASTER* I SAY!

WE'VE A PRIZE TO TAKE THIS NIGHT. A MOST MEATY AND DELICIOUS PRIZE!

ABRUPTLY, THE CLOYING, GRASPING WOODS GIVE WAY TO OPEN GROUND.

BUT BEN IS NOT ALTOGETHER SURE THAT IT IS AN IMPROVEMENT.

OH, TERRIFIC. THIS PLACE JUST GETS BETTER AN' BETTER, DON'T IT?

WELL, ANY OL' PORT IN A STORM, OR SO THEY SAY. I AIN'T IN NO POSITION TA WORRY ABOUT THE DECOR...

...I JUST HOPE THE OWNER AIN'T FUSSY ABOUT WHO HE HAS STOPPIN' BY FER TH'...

AW... SPIT!

THE FANGS OF THE ROTTEN WOOD SEEM ALMOST TO LEER AT HIM, MOCKING.

IF THERE IS A PASSAGE INTO THIS STRANGE, SPECTRAL HOUSE, IT WILL NOT BE HAD EASILY.

NOT EASILY AT ALL...

WELL, HERE GOES NOTHIN'!!

NUTS!

THE ANCIENT WOOD IS DAMP AND CRUMBLY BENEATH HIS STRONG HANDS...

...AND IN NO WAY SUITED TO THE PURPOSE IT NOW FINDS ITSELF PUT TO.

IT'S... BREAKIN' AWAY. GONNA...

...FALL...

THIS MUST BE TH' PART WHERE MY WHOLE LIFE FLASHES BEFORE MY...

...EYES?

HANH?!?

HAVE NO FEAR, TRAVELER. THE DEMONS OF THE NIGHT SHALL NOT CLAIM YOU.

YOU ARE SAFE IN MY CHARGE.

WELCOME TO MY HOUSE. ENTER FREELY AND OF YOUR OWN WILL.

YEAH? WELL, 'SCUSE ME FER QUIBBLIN' DETAILS AFTER YA JUST SAVED MY HIDE, PAL, BUT I AIN'T EXACTLY HERE OF MY OWN WILL.

BEN GRIMM'S WORDS ECHO BACK TO HIM, HOLLOW AND EMPTY THINGS IN THE GREAT STONE HALL. HIS POUNDING HEART REMINDS HIM OF HOW TRUE HIS WORDS ARE, HOW CLOSE HE CAME A MOMENT AGO TO ENDING HIS LIFE HERE, ON AN ALIEN WORLD, UNCOUNTED LIGHT-YEARS FROM THE FAMILIAR SIGHTS OF EARTH.

BUT THE GHASTLY FAMILIARITY OF HIS HOST, AND HIS GREETING, SERVE ALSO TO REMIND HIM THAT WHATEVER IT IS HE HAS INADVERTANTLY STUMBLED INTO IT HAS VERY LITTLE TO DO WITH REALITY.

VERY LITTLE INDEED.

I FORGIVE YOU YOUR DISCOURTESY, MY FRIEND. YOU ARE DOUBTLESS SHAKEN BY YOUR NARROW BRUSH WITH DEATH.

CLEARLY, YOU ARE ARE A MAN OF GREAT VIGOR, OF BOUNDLESS LOVE FOR LIFE, WITH ALL ITS JOYS, ALL ITS BITTER SORROWS. I ENVY YOU THAT.

BUT I AM LAX IN MY DUTIES AS HOST.

YOU MUST BE COLD IN SUCH AN ABBREVIATED OUTFIT. AND I SUSPECT HUNGRY, TOO, SO FAR FROM TOWN, SO LATE. PLEASE, LET ME OFFER YOU SUCH HOSPITALITY AS I HAVE.

SURE. I'LL PLAY ALONG WITH YER GAME, AT LEAST UNTIL I GOT ME A BETTER IDEA A' WHAT'S GOIN' ON 'ROUND HERE.

THANKS, PAL. I COULD GO FER A BURGER AN' FRIES...

THAT'S IT, FRIEND. WALK RIGHT IN, LIKE A FLY INTO A SPIDER'S WEB.

YOUR CURIOSITY HAS BEEN PIQUED. YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO WALK OUT ON THIS PIECE OF HISTORY UNTIL YOU UNDERSTAND IT. BUT THAT UNDERSTANDING WILL COST YOU. A LOT.

NOT SO MUCH AS IT WILL COST YOU, SHOULD I EVER FREE MYSELF OF THESE BONDS, MONSTER. YOU MAY HAVE CAPTURED ME, BUT BENGRIMM WILL PROVE MORE THAN YOUR MATCH.

YOU DO NOT KNOW HIM AS I DO.

HAHAHAHAHAHA! I WISH YOU COULD REALLY UNDERSTAND HOW WRONG YOU ARE, ***TARRIANNA***. I KNOW BEN GRIMM FAR, FAR BETTER THAN YOU DO, THAN YOU EVER ***COULD!***

IN FACT, I'D BET THERE ISN'T ANOTHER HUMAN BEING IN ALL THE UNIVERSE WHO KNOWS HIM AS WELL AS I DO. NOT EVEN HIS BELOVED *ALICIA.*

YOU SEEM TO ENJOY TALKING IN RIDDLES, MONSTER. LET ME LOOSE AND I WILL SHOW YOU HOW WE DEAL WITH SUCH GAMES IN MY VILLAGE.

I'M SURE YOU WOULD. BUT HOW YOU'D HANDLE ME, OR ANYONE ELSE IN THAT IMAGINARY VILLAGE OF YOURS IS NOT MY CONCERN. NOT MY CONCERN AT ALL.

IMAGINARY? BY THE NINE PEAKS, LET ME LOOSE OF THESE BONDS AND I'LL SHOW YOU WHO AND WHAT IS IMAGINARY!

OF COURSE. BUT I HAVE NO INTENTION OF LETTING YOU LOOSE, SO THERE'S NOT MUCH POINT IN DISCUSSING IT, IS THERE?

SINCE OUR... FRIEND BEN SEEMS WELL TAKEN CARE OF FOR THE MOMENT, I THINK WE CAN SAFELY LOOK ELSEWHERE...

BEN GRIMM HAS TOUCHED MANY LIVES ACROSS THE FACE OF THIS WORLD. FEW OF THEM ARE OF CONSEQUENCE, BUT THIS ONE, THIS ONE IN PARTICULAR, CAN AND WILL BE HIS DOWNFALL.

"A DOWNFALL HE CANNOT ANTICIPATE, AND CANNOT ESCAPE."

THERE! THEY COME! THEY COME!

LEATHERN WINGS BEATING HARD AGAINST THE THIN, HOT AIR THE GREAT BEAST SETTLES HEAVILY TO THE SANDS.

THIS IS NOT THE FIRST TIME IT HAS MADE THIS TRIP, BEARING ITS DIMINUTIVE, LIVING CARGO.

HAIL, *LLRRLLLLNNLLYYRRL.* WE HAVE SUCCEEDED AT LAST IN OUR GREAT QUEST.

WE HAVE SEARCHED LONG AND HARD, LLRRLLLLNNLLYYRRL, BUT AT LEAST WE HAVE COMPLETED THE TASK SET FOR US BY THE GREAT ONE.

A SLOW AND GROWING MURMUR PASSES THROUGH HER FELLOW VILLAGERS AS THE SKY-THIEVES DRAW NEARER WITH THIS STRANGE BURDEN.

HER POSITION HAS CHANGED MUCH OF LATE. NO LONGER SIMPLY THE POOR KITCHEN MAID, THESE REPEATED VISITS BY THESE SMALL CREATURES, STILL GREATLY FEARED BY MOST OF THE VILLAGE, HAVE ELEVATED HER TO UNDREAMED OF CELEBRITY.

TAKE BACK YOUR DOWRY, LADY, AND FORGIVE US THE TRANSGRESSION OF STEALING FROM YOU.

BUT...

BUT...

BUT...

BUT THIS IS NOT MY DOWRY!

BLAST!!

MEANWHILE, NOT FAR, AND YET SOMEHOW INFINITELY FAR AWAY...

THE COLD WINDS WHISTLE THROUGH THE HALLS OF CASTLE DRACULA, CRYING LIKE THE TORTURED SPIRITS OF LOST SOULS. BEN GRIMM FEELS A LITTLE LOST HIMSELF.

I WONDER WHAT'S HAPPENED TO ***MEIN HOST***? HE SAID HE'D BE BACK IN A COUPLA MINUTES, BUT THAT MUSTA BEEN HALF AN HOUR AGO.

NOT THAT IT'S ALL THAT EASY TA KEEP TRACK A' TH' TIME IN THIS JOINT. IN FACT, THIS WHOLE PLANET'D MAKE A WATCH-MAKER QUIT AN' LOOK FER HONEST WORK!

I GUESS I BEEN IN THIS AREA ABOUT THREE HOURS, MEBBE FOUR. IT WAS HIGH NOON WHEN I HIT THE EDGE OF THEM WOODS. NOW YA'D THINK IT WAS MIDNIGHT.

I'M STARTIN' TA GET TH' FEELING STAYIN' ON THIS PLANET WUZN'T TH' SMARTEST THING I EVER DID IN MY LIFE.

I'D THOUGHT A PLACE LIKE THIS WHERE NOBODY EVER HEARD OF TH' ***THING,*** OR TH' ***FANTASTIC FOUR*** WOULD BE A GOOD PLACE TO SORT OUT MY HEAD, FIGGER OUT WHAT I WANNA DO WITH MYSELF.

REED SAID THERE'S SOMETHIN' CRAZY IN THIS PLANET, SOMETHIN' IN TH' SOIL, OR TH' AIR, OR SOMETHIN! THAT LET'S ME BE BEN GRIMM WHENEVER I WANT FER AS LONG AS I WANT...

...STEAD'A BEING...

...A ROCKY ORANGE MONSTER...

...CALLED ***THE THING!***

AS ALWAYS, THE CHANGE BRINGS NO PAIN, SAVE THE TERRIBLE DAGGER OF ANGUISH DIGGING DEEP INTO THE SOFT UNDERBELLY OF BEN'S MIND -- THE FEAR, IRRATIONAL HERE, THAT HE WILL BE TRAPPED FOREVER IN THIS GROTESQUE FORM.

HERE YOU ARE, LONELY TRAVELER. MY CELLARS ARE ILL-PREPARED FOR SUCH MEALS, BUT I HOPE THIS WILL...

WHAT IN THE NAME OF...?

ER... HIYA... MAYBE I SHOULD EXPLAIN...

YOU HAVE ERRED GREATLY TO INVADE THE SANCTITY OF MY CASTLE KEEP, NIGHT-MONSTER!

AW, NUTS!

WITH SUDDEN SPEED THAT BELIES HIS PRESENT BULK, THE TRANSFORMED BEN GRIMM NEATLY DODGES THE ATTACK.

UNGH!!

HOWCOME NOBODY EVER WANTS TA STOP AN' TALK IT OUT BEFORE THEY TRY TA BASH IN MY ROCKY LI'L NOGGIN'?!

I OFFERED YOU FOOD AND SHELTER, TRAVELER. I DID NOT EXPECT TO HAVE YOU THUS BETRAY MY TRUST!

THE CASTLE IS DENIED TO SUCH AS YOU. LEARN NOW THE EXTENT OF YOUR FOLLY.

LIKE A WAXEN IMAGE STANDING IN A BLAZING SUMMER SUN, THE DIGNIFIED FEATURES OF THE CASTLE MASTER SHIFT AND FLOW---

... UNTIL, LIKE A GREAT BLACK SHROUD, THE MONSTER BAT SUDDENLY ITSELF AT THE FLABBERGHASTED THING.

HOLY CATS! I KNEW THIS GUY REMINDED ME O' THAT GUY WHO WUZ SUPPOSED TO BE TA CHANGE INTA A VAMPIRE BAT...

...BUT I THOUGHT IT WUZ SUPPOSED TA BE ***REG'LAR SIZED!!***

SHREEEK

THE CREATURE'S INHUMAN SHRIEK IS THE THING'S ONLY REPLY. IF HIS MYSTERIOUS HOST STILL LIVES WITHIN THIS TRANSFORMED SHAPE, HE IS BUT A TINY PART OF ITS BESTIAL PSYCHE.

EE-YEOW!!

ALTHOUGH HE CRIES OUT IN SUDDEN ALARM, THE IS NO FEAR IN THE THING'S VOICE. HE HAS FACED TOO MANY TERRORS, TOO MANY INDESCRIBABLE HORRORS ON TOO MANY WORLDS TO BE TRULY AFRAID NOW.

BUT THE HUGE BLACK BAT DOES REACH INTO DIM AND DISTANT MEMORIES, TOUCHING ON CHILDHOOD FEARS, ON NIGHTS WITH HEAD BURIED UNDER ALL-PROTECTING COVERS, AS SHADOWS LOOMED, AND DARK THINGS OOZED FROM BED-ROOM WALLS.

BEN GRIMM'S CHILDHOOD HAD BEEN FILLED WITH HORRORS ENOUGH, WITHOUT THE IMAGINED MONSTERS OF HOLLYWOOD. AN ALCOHOLIC, PERENIALLY UNEMPLOYED FATHER. AN INEFFECTUAL MOTHER. A MUCH-BELOVED OLDER BROTHER CUT DOWN IN THE BLOOM OF YOUTH.

STILL, THE YOUNG BEN HAD LOVED THE DARK CONFINES OF HIS NEIGHBORHOOD MOVIE HOUSES, SNEAKING IN THE BACK WAYS WHEN THERE WAS NO MONEY TO PAY, REVELING IN THE PURE ESCAPE OF HEROES AND VILLAINS SO MUCH BIGGER THAN LIFE.

WORTH IT, EVEN IF IT SOMETIMES COST HIM NIGHTMARES.

BUT THIS IS NOT A NIGHTMARE...

...AND FROM THIS REALITY THERE IS NOT TO BE HAD THE COZY ESCAPE OF CLOSING CREDITS AND RAISED HOUSE-LIGHTS.

OWITCH!!

HOLY! YA ACTUALLY GOT THROUGH MY SKIN-PLATES! I'M BLEEDIN'!!

FOR THE BRIEFEST FRACTION OF AN INSTANT, SOMETHING AKIN TO TERROR SWELLS IN THE THING'S BREAST, THREATENING TO CONSUME ALL.

ALLUVA SUDDEN, THIS DON'T SEEM LIKE NO FUN!

'SCUZE MY MANNERS, PAL, BUT I THINK I'LL BE GOING NOW!

KER-SMASH

OH, FER...

THUD THUMP

THE SUDDEN STAIRS TAKE THE THING TOTALLY BY SURPRISE.

THE AMAZING GRACE HE DISPLAYED ONLY A MOMENT AGO IN DODGING HIS FOE SEEMS TO DEPART AS SWIFTLY AS HIS ENEMY APPROACHES.

THE SHADOW IS AS COLD AND BLACK AS DEATH'S OWN, AS IT ENFOLDS HIM.

BENEATH HIS ROCK-LIKE HIDE HIS FLESH CRAWLS, HIS HEART POUNDS.

BUT MIRACULOUSLY, HIS MIND STAYS CRYSTAL CLEAR...

ONLY ONE THING I CAN DO...

SHRREEEEEEE?!

IN LESS THAN A HEART-BEAT, THE SHRIEK OF VICTORY TWISTS INTO A TERRIBLE SCREAM OF ANGER AND DESPAIR.

I DON'T KNOW IF THIS IS SUPPOSED TA WORK ON A ***REAL*** VAMPIRE...

... BUT THEN, YOU AIN'T REALLY ***REAL***, ARE YA?

YER JUST LIKE ONE A' THEM HOLLY-WOOD VAMPIRES. JUST A FIGMENT A' SOMEBODY'S IMAGINATION.

MY IMAGINATION!

HE WONDERS WHETHER TO REJOICE IN THIS STRANGE VICTORY. NEVER ONE FOR GLOATING OVER FALLEN FOES, BEN GRIMM CANNOT FIND MUCH JOY IN DEFEATING SOMETHING THAT, HE IS BEGINNING TO REALIZE, WOULD NOT EVEN HAVE EXISTED HAD HIS MIND NOT MADE IT SO.

NOW WHERE AM I?

THE DARK CORRIDOR SEEMS INCONGRUOUS INDEED IN THE MIDST OF THIS CASTLE TORN FROM THE BAVARIAN ALPS. THE STYLE IS THAT OF ANCIENT EGYPT, IN THE LONG-LOST REIGNS OF THE PHARAOHS.

AND TO BEN GRIMM, THIS CHANGE OF DECOR CAN MEAN ONLY ONE THING...

I WONDER IF I CAN SOMEHOW PREVENT TH' NEXT STEP!

I KNOW WHAT'S GOTTA BE COMIN', BUT MAYBE IF I FORCE MYSELF NOT TO THINK ABOUT IT, IT WON'T...

"...HAPPEN."

AS A LAD, THE RUSSIAN NOVELIST, TOLSTOY, BELONGED TO A CLUB. THE MEMBERSHIP EXAM CONSISTED OF BEING SAT IN A CORNER ON TOLD NOT TO THINK OF A WHITE HORSE.

AS THE THING IS NOW DISCOVERING, IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO **NOT THINK** OF ANYTHING, ONCE THE THOUGHT HAS BEEN PUT IN ONE'S MIND.

NAW. I DIDN'T THINK IT'D WORK!

AS FOR WHAT MIGHT BE ON THIS WALKING NIGHTMARE'S MIND...

...THE ANSWER IS ALL TOO IMMEDIATELY OBVIOUS!

BLAST! I AIN'T IN NO MOOD TA WALTZ AROUND WITH THIS WALKIN' BAND-AID AD!

AN' IT SEEMS LIKE THIS BUGGER'S A WHOLE LOT TOUGHER THAN SOMETHIN' THAT'S BEEN DOIN' IT'S BEST TA TURN INTA *DUST* FER A FEW THOUSAND YEARS OUGHTA BE!

INDEED, THE GAUZE WRAPPED LIMBS SEEM VIBRANT BEYOND BELIEF, BURSTING WITH POWER.

MORE POWER THAN WOULD SEEM LIKELY...

...OR LOGICAL.

WHAT IN THE NAME A' ?!!

SHA-KOOM

THIS IS GETTING JUST A TAD *TOO* CRAZY!

I AIN'T NEVER SEEN NO MUMMY MOVIE WHERE THE CREEP CAME EQUIPPED WITH A BUILT IN LASER-BEAM.

I DON'T BELIEVE ALLA THIS IS COMIN' OUTTA *MY* HEAD!

NOT ENTIRELY, ANYHOW.

AND, AS THAT THOUGHT PASSES BRIEFLY, AS IF FROM A GREAT DISTANCE THE THING FANCIES HE HEARS LAUGHTER. COLD, MOCKING, AND YET HAUNTINGLY FAMILIAR.

HA HA HA HA HA

WHO IS THAT? WHO IS THAT LAUGHIN'?!

SHOW YERSELF, BLAST YA!!

BOOM

SHROOM

BUT, BEFORE AN ANSWER CAN BE ATTEMPTED...

IN THE WAKE OF THE FURIOUS BATTLE, THE SUDDEN SILENCE FALLS WITH THE WEIGHT OF THE WHOLE CASTLE.

FOR LONG, ACHING MOMENTS NOTHING STIRS, SAVE THE SLOWLY SETTLING DUST. THE BANDAGE-WRAPPED CREATURE PAUSES, SEEMING TO BE CAUGHT HALF WAY BETWEEN JUBILATION AND CONFUSION.

THE ROCK-LIKE FOE HAD BATTLED WELL, SUCCESSFULLY ELUDING THE DEATH BLASTS FROM HIS EYES.

THE MUMMY WONDERS, SOMEWHERE DEEP IN ITS BLACK, SHRIVELED BRAIN HOW VICTORY COULD'VE COME SO QUICKLY.

IT NEED NOT HAVE WORRIED, IF WORRY IT WAS.

THE THING IS FAR FROM FINISHED.

OKAY, PALLY...

IT'S CLOBBERIN' TIME!!

HOW NEARLY PALPABLE A THING IS HIS RAGE. HIS BROAD, SOLID FORM SEEMS ALMOST TO TREMBLE, AS HE FIGHTS BACK THE FURY THAT SWELLS WITHIN.

AWRIGHT, I KNOW THERE'S SOMEBODY PULLIN' SOME KINDA STRINGS HERE!

COME OUT AN' SHOW YERSELF LIKE A MAN, OR I'LL PULL THIS TINKER TOY CASTLE DOWN PIECE BY PIECE UNTIL I FIND YA!

SAVE YOUR THREATS, MY FRIEND. THEY DON'T SCARE ME.

HAH? THAT VOICE...? IT *HAD* TA BE HIM!!

WELL, MAYBE MY THREATS *SHOULD* SCARE YA, PAL! I AIN'T BEEN ENJOYIN' MYSELF TOO MUCH ON THIS MUD-BALL LATELY. IF I FIND OUT YOU'VE BEEN BEHIND...

OF COURSE I HAVE. I HAVE BEEN CONTROLLING *EVERYTHING*,* YOU POOR, STUPID FOOL!

*SEE THING #S 11-18 FOR *EVERYTHING*.

I SHOULDA KNOWN! I SHOULDA KNOWN ALL THIS STUPID STUFF COULDN'T A' BEEN HAPPENIN' TA ME JUST 'CAUSE THIS LAME-BRAINED PLANET WUZ FEEDIN' OFF MY UNCONSCIOUS!

BUT...WHO ARE YA? AT LEAST TELL ME THAT, BEFORE I POP YER HEAD OFF LIKE A RIPE MELON!

OH... I'M JUST SOMEBODY YOU USED TO KNOW. SOMEBODY WHO *HATES* YOU!

HATES ME? PAL, SO FAR AS I KNOW, THERE ARE AN AWFUL LOT A' FOLKS WHO AIN'T EXACTLY FOND OF MAMMA GRIMM'S LITTLE BOY, BENJAMIN, AN' MOST OF 'EM GOT GATHERED UP AN' DUMPED ON THIS PLANET BY THAT *BEYONDER* GUY.*

BUT ALLA THEM TOOK OFF WHEN WE FINISHED UP TH' EXPERIMENT HE WAS PLAYIN' WITH, SO YOU *AIN'T* ONE A' THEM!

*SEE MARVEL SUPER HEROES; SECRET WARS

NOW WHO ARE YA?!

OH, FER...

THE DARK ROBES CRUMBLE, DISCARDED AND EMPTY.

HEY!

THE SOLID FLOOR BENEATH HIS FEET SEEMS SUDDENLY, EQUALLY INSUBSTANTIAL.

UNGHFF!

MAN-O-MAN, I HAVE JUST ABOUT...

AW NO...

NOT YOU!!

BUT THEN, WHO ELSE?

WHO ELSE BUT THE BLASTED FRANKENSTEIN MONSTER?!

TO BE CONTINUED-- IN FANTASTIC FOUR #274 ON SALE IN 3 WEEKS!!

NEXT

THE THING HAS FOUGHT THE MONSTERS OF MOVIE LAND, AND THE MONSTER OF HIS OWN MIND--

THE WORST IS YET TO COME

DON'T DARE MISS

THE WAY THINGS WERE!

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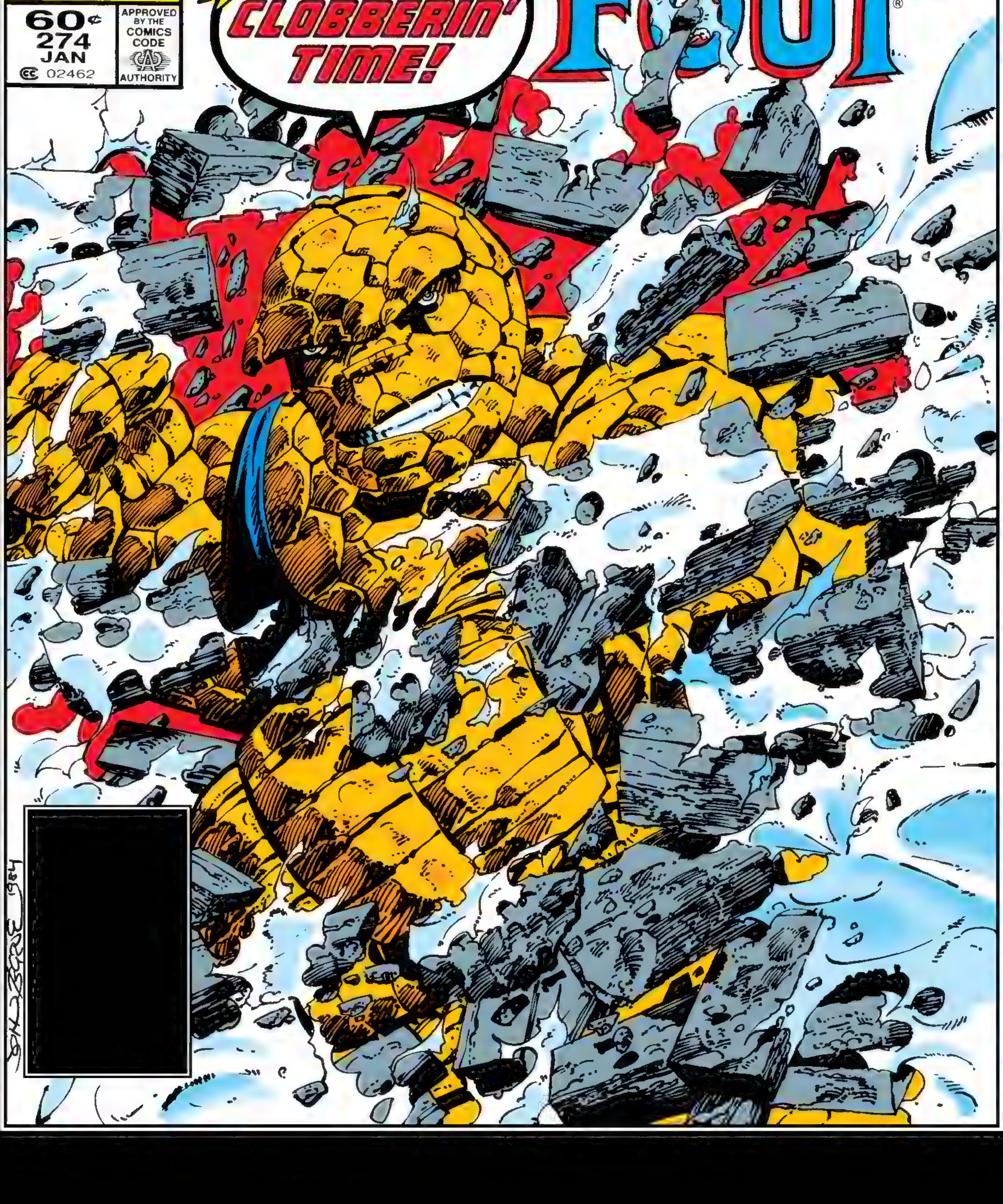
AT LAST!

IT'S CLOBBERIN' TIME!



BUSCEMA 1984

BELLE PORTE, CONNECTICUT, A PLEASANT LITTLE COMMUNITY SOME TWO HUNDRED MILES NORTH OF NEW YORK CITY.

AND, NO LESS PLEASANT THAN BELLE PORTE ITSELF IS THE COMFORTABLE DOMICILE WHICH HOUSES THE COUPLE KNOWN TO THEIR NEIGHBORS AS REED AND SUSAN BENJAMIN.

ON THIS PARTICULAR AUTUMN AFTERNOON, HOWEVER, THE BENJAMINS HAVE A VISITOR.

THERE'S SOMETHING STRANGE ABOUT THESE PEOPLE. I JUST KNOW IT.

HER NAME IS ALMA CHALMERS, AND IN THE FIFTY-EIGHT YEARS SINCE HER BIRTH HERE IN BELLE PORTE SHE HAS MADE SOMETHING OF A REPUTATION FOR HERSELF AS A GOSSIP AND BUSY-BODY.

ALICE WINCHELL FROM NEXT DOOR SAYS I'M JUST BEING NOSEY, BUT I'LL SHOW HER!

THROUGH HER PRIMITIVE PERISCOPE ALMA SPIES ON WHAT SEEMS AT FIRST A TYPICAL DOMESTIC SCENE.

IT'S ROLLED RIGHT OUT OF REACH, NATURALLY.

JEN--CAN YOU GIVE ME A HAND?

OF COURSE, SUSAN. GLAD TO HELP.

BUT, SINCE I SUSPECT YOU'RE NOT INTERESTED IN THE LEGAL RAMIFICATIONS OF AN EAR-RING UNDER THE 'FRIDGE...

...IT'S PROBABLY NOT JENNIFER WALTERS, LADY LAWYER, WHOSE HELP YOU NEED...

BUT THE ONE AND ONLY SHE-HULK?

THE GAMMA RADIATION IN HER BLOOD WORKS ITS REMARKABLE CHANGE IN THE YOUNG WOMAN, AND...

THERE YOU GO, SUE. I MAY NOT BE AS STRONG AS THE *THING*, BUT I'M JUST AS HANDY AROUND THE HOUSE.

THANKS, JENNIFER. I'VE GOT IT NOW.

COME TO THINK OF IT I SUPPOSE I COULD HAVE PULLED THE WRETCHED THING OUT FROM UNDER THERE WITH ONE OF MY *INVISIBLE FORCE FIELDS.*

I GUESS I'M GETTING TOO GOOD AT THIS "HARRIET HOUSEWIFE" *SECRET IDENTITY* BUSINESS. IT DIDN'T EVEN OCCUR TO...

CLATTER!

WHAT WAS...?

UH OH. LOOKS AS IF WE HAD SOMEONE SPYING ON US, JEN.

ONE OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD KIDS, FROM THE EVIDENCE.

AND, ACROSS THE STREET...

SLAM!

TH-THEY'RE *MONSTERS! WITCHES!!*

AND I KNOW *JUST* WHAT TO DO ABOUT THEM.

OCCULT

M DUNG HEAVY DUTY

THE REST OF THIS TOWN MAY THINK THE BENJAMINS ARE JUST NICE FOLKS, BUT I KNOW BETTER NOW--AND I KNOW THEY'VE GOT TO BE *DESTROYED!*

AND, BACK AT THE "BENJAMINS"...

WE'D BETTER CALL REED AT OUR BAXTER H.Q. AND LET HIM KNOW WE MAY HAVE BEEN OBSERVED. MY TRANSPONDER'S UPSTAIRS.

WAIT HERE WHILE I GET IT, JEN.

THIS SECRET IDENTITY BUSINESS IS MOST PECULIAR, AFTER ALL THESE YEARS OF THE WORLD KNOWING WHO THE MEMBERS OF THE *FANTASTIC FOUR* ARE.

I'M REALLY BEGINNING TO EMPATHIZE WITH JENNIFER. SHE PRETENDS NOT TO CARE, BUT I KNOW SHE'S NOT REALLY READY FOR EVERYONE TO KNOW SHE'S...

...SHE'S...

THE THOUGHT DIES UNFINISHED. THE CLOSED DOOR SEEMS TO BECKON THE DISGUISED SUSAN STORM RICHARDS, A SIREN CALL SHE CANNOT IGNORE.

THE NURSERY.

FOR SO MANY A ROOM FILLED WITH JOY AND LIFE, AND THE BOUNDLESS PROMISE OF POSTERITY.

BUT FOR SUSAN THERE IS ONLY THE GNAWING EMPTINESS IN HER HEART, THE STILL-FRESH WOUND OF A LOST CHILD.

FOR THE EMOTIONS SHE NOW FEELS SLICING THROUGH HER THERE ARE NO WORDS.

THE INTENDED CALL TO HER HUSBAND WILL GO UNPLACED FOR QUITE SOME TIME.

MEANWHILE...

THE BAXTER BUILDING HAS SERVED AS HEADQUARTERS TO THE FANTASTIC FOUR SINCE JUST A FEW MONTHS AFTER THE FATEFUL BOMBARDMENT BY COSMIC RAYS THAT GAVE THE ORIGINAL MEMBERS THEIR POWERS.

AND IT HAS SERVED THEM WELL. BUT, TODAY, IN ONE OF THE MANY LABORATORIES IN THE TOWER COMPLEX ABOVE THE THIRTIETH FLOOR...

MOVE OUR H.Q. OUT OF THE BAXTER BUILDING? REED, YOU'VE GOTTA BE KIDDING!

NOT AT ALL, JOHNNY. I AM PERFECTLY SERIOUS.

BUT... BUT THE OL' GIRL'S THE FF'S HOME. YOU CAN'T REALLY BE THINKING OF LEAVING AFTER ALL THESE YEARS.

THAT'S JUST MY POINT.

SUE AND I NOW HAVE A RESIDENCE IN CONNECTICUT. YOU HAVE YOUR LOFT APARTMENT. SHE-HULK HAS DECIDED SHE, TOO, WOULD PREFER TO LIVE ELSEWHERE WHILE SHE'S WITH THE FANTASTIC FOUR.

THE BUILDING IS NO LONGER TRULY OUR HOME. IT IS SIMPLY A CENTRAL MEETING PLACE.

AND, TO BE HONEST, NOSTALGIA NOT-WITHSTANDING, FANTASTIC FOUR INCORPORATED SIMPLY NEEDS MORE ROOM.

I'VE MAXIMIZED THE EFFICIENCY OF USE OF EVERY SQUARE FOOT OF OUR FIVE FLOORS, AND IT JUST ISN'T ENOUGH.

OH, CERTAINLY WHEN WE FIRST BECAME THE FANTASTIC FOUR THERE SEEMED MORE THAN ENOUGH ROOM, BUT MY INVENTIONS HAVE MULTIPLIED BEYOND THE TOWER'S CAPACITY TO CONTAIN THEM.

COULDN'T YOU JUST EXPAND INTO THE REST OF THE BUILDING, REED? SURELY SOME OF THE TENANTS ON THE LOWER FLOORS WOULD BE WILLING TO VACATE?

I'M AFRAID I'VE ALREADY INVESTIGATED THAT POSSIBILITY, ALICIA, AND THE ANSWER IS NO. MR. COLLINS, THE FORMER OWNER, WAS ABLE TO ENTICE TENANTS INTO THE BUILDING-- KNOWING THE POTENTIAL DANGERS OF HAVING US JUST UPSTAIRS-- ONLY BY OFFERING IRON-CLAD 99 YEAR LEASES WITH INCREDIBLE DISCOUNTS IN RENT, AND WITH THE TENANTS' OPTION TO TERMINATE.

I'M AFRAID AS THE CURRENT OWNER I'M STUCK WITH THOSE LEASES, AND NO ONE WANTS TO MOVE VOLUNTARILY.

THAT SEEMS SUCH A SHAME. I'VE ALMOST COME TO THINK OF THE BUILDING AS A *FIFTH* MEMBER OF YOUR TEAM.

YEAH, SHE DOES SEEM TO HAVE A PERSONALITY ALL HER OWN SOMETIMES. IT MAKES ME FEEL LIKE MAYBE AN ERA IS ENDING.

PERHAPS. BUT CHANGE HAS ALWAYS BEEN A *MAJOR* INGREDIENT IN THE CHEMISTRY OF OUR LITTLE GROUP. I PREFER TO LOOK UPON THIS DECISION AS A NEW *BEGINNING,* RATHER THAN AN ENDING.

MAYBE. MAYBE. ANYWAY, IT'S GETTING KIND OF LATE, ALICIA, AND I DID PROMISE TO ESCORT YOU TO THAT LECTURE ON MODERN KINETIC SCULPTURE.

OH YES. WELL... GOOD AFTER-NOON REED.

GOOD DAY, ALICIA, JOHNNY. I HOPE YOU ENJOY THE LECTURE. IT SOUNDS INTERESTING.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO COME WITH US?

NO. NO THANKS. I HAVE FAR TOO MUCH WORK TO CATCH UP ON.

*BUT AFTER THE TWO YOUNGER PEOPLE HAVE DEPARTED IT IS SEVERAL MOMENTS BEFORE THE GIANT INTELLECT OF THE MAN CALLED **MISTER FANTASTIC** RETURNS FULLY TO HIS EXPERIMENTS.*

JOHNNY AND ALICIA?

PERHAPS I'M READING MORE INTO THIS THAN IS REALLY THERE, BUT I SEEM TO SENSE SOMETHING BEGINNING TO HAPPEN BETWEEN THEM.

SOMETHING MORE THAN THE GREAT FRIENDSHIP WE ALL FEEL FOR HER.

IN FACT, I WOULDN'T THINK EVEN WARMTH OF FRIENDSHIP WOULD PROMPT OUR JOHNNY TO VOLUNTARILY ATTEND *ANY* LECTURE ON MODERN ART.

NOT TO SPEAK ILL OF THE LAD, BUT OF THE FOUR OF US HE'S ALWAYS BEEN... WELL, THE LEAST INTELLECTUALLY MOTIVATED.

HM. STRANGELY ENOUGH I CAN'T HELP BUT THINK THAT ALICIA WOULD BE EXACTLY THE RIGHT KIND OF WOMAN FOR JOHNNY. WARM. SENSITIVE. MARVELOUSLY PERCEPTIVE, DESPITE THE FACT THAT SHE'S ***BLIND.***

BUT... WHAT WILL HAPPEN WHEN ***BEN*** RETURNS FROM THE PLANET OF THE "SECRET WARS?" MOST OF THE WORLD SEEMS TO THINK OF "ALICIA MASTERS, THE THING'S GIRLFRIEND," AS IF IT WERE ALL ONE WORD.

AND, THINKING OF ***BEN,*** I WONDER HOW HE'S FARING OUT THERE ACROSS THE REACHES OF SPACE, ALL ALONE ON THAT STRANGE, ALIEN WORLD.

WELL... IF I KNOW ***BEN GRIMM***-- AND WHO AMONG US KNOWS HIM BETTER?-- HE'S PROBABLY HAVING THE TIME OF HIS LIFE...

REALLY?

LET US TAKE A MOMENT TO CONSIDER **REED RICHARDS'** ASSUMPTION.

TO DO THAT WE MUST LEAVE BEHIND THE VERDANT GLOBE OF THE PLANET EARTH.

...LEAVE BEHIND EVEN THE FAMILIAR SECURITY OF THE SOLAR SYSTEM.

PASSING BEYOND THE VERY RIM OF THE MILKY WAY...

...OUT ACROSS THE MEASURELESS GULF OF INTERGALACTIC SPACE...

TO THIS BLEAK, EMPTY CORNER OF THE COSMOS, WHERE A GREAT WHEEL OF STARS ONCE TURNED IN SOLEMN SPLENDOR.

NOW BUT A SINGLE PLANET ROLLS ACROSS THE TRACKLESS DEEPS OF SPACE, AN ODD, CRAZY-QUILT WORLD WHERE LATELY A BATTLE OF TRULY COSMIC PROPORTIONS UNFOLDED.*

THAT BATTLE HAS ENDED--FOR NOW--BUT **PEACE** HAS NOT YET COME TO THIS PECULIAR WORLD...

FOR PEACE HAS NOT YET COME TO THE MIND OF **BEN GRIMM**...

* AS WITNESSED IN **MARVEL SUPER HEROES SECRET WARS**, A 12-PART LIMITED SERIES (THE 9th ISSUE OF WHICH IS ON SALE NOW!)

Stan Lee PRESENTS:

MONSTER MASH

PART TWO*

THE KEENING WIND IS A BANSHEE WAIL AS IT WHISTLES OVER SLIME-SLICKED STONE.

IN THE CRUMBLING RUINS OF A CASTLE BUILT OF BAD-DREAMS THE MAN CALLED THE THING FACES A WALKING NIGHTMARE.

HOLY COW! IT'S THE FRANKENSTEIN MONSTER!!

*AND SHAME ON YOU IF YOU MISSED PART ONE IN THE THING #19.

JOHN BYRNE PENCILING & SCRIPTING / AL GORDON INKING / GLYNIS WEIN COLORING / DIANA ALBERS LETTERING / MICHAEL CARLIN EDITING / JIM SHOOTER EDITING IN CHIEFING

YEAH... AN' WHY NOT? ACCORDIN' TA WHAT REED TOLD ME--BEFORE HIM AN' JOHNNY AND SHE-HULK HEADED BACK TA EARTH--THIS PLANET WUZ CREATED TA *MIRROR* TH' THOUGHTS OF US FOLKS THAT WUZ BROUGHT HERE BY TH' *BEYONDER*.*

*AND WE ALREADY TOLD YA WHERE TO FIND THAT TALE, RIGHT?

I JUST SPENT TH' LAST COUPLA HOURS WALTZIN' THROUGH ALL THE BAD DREAMS I GOT STORED UP IN MY HEAD FROM WHEN I WUZ A KID, GOIN' T' SEE THEM OLD HOLLYWOOD MONSTER MOVIES.*

DRACULA AN' TH' *MUMMY'*VE HAD THEIR TURNS. GUESS IT JUST STOOD TO REASON OL' TALL, GREEN AN' GRUESOME'D BE NEXT.

* *IN THING #19, OF COURSE.*

BUT I THINK I'LL TRY A DIFFERENT APPROACH WITH THIS GUY. SEE IF HE FEELS LIKE *TALKIN'*...

...IF HE *CAN* TALK.

ER... HIYA. MY NAME'S *GRIMM*. I... ER...

HELLO?

THE CREATURE'S ANSWER IS SUDDEN, AND NOT AT ALL WHAT BEN EXPECTED.

HEY!

WHAP!

NOW JUST A DAD-BLAMED MINUTE, PAL. IN ALL THEM MOVIES YOU WUZ ALWAYS TH' ONE I FELT SORRY FOR, BUT IF YA WANT TA PLAY IT *ROUGH*...

I'LL BE HAPPY TA BUST YA RIGHT BACK DOWN INTA ALL THEM SPARE PARTS THEY MADE YOU OUTTA.

OR, TA PUT THAT IN TERMS YA MIGHT FIND EASIER TA UNDERSTAND...

IT'S CLOBBERIN' TIME!!

WHAM

...WATCH...

UH-OH!

WHOUF!

WOW! HE'S MORE AGILE THAN I GAVE HIM CREDIT FER. I BETTER...

EVERYBODY KNOWS HE'S SUPPOSED TA BE STRONGER'N A NORMAL MAN, BUT HEFTING ALL THAT MASONRY...

WAIT A SECOND. WHAT...

...GIVES?!

WELL I'LL BE SWOZZLED! HE'S BIN *SHOT!*

DON'T YOU WORRY ABOUT HIM, BOY. IT'S JUST A *TRANQUILIZER DART.* HE'LL BE ASLEEP FOR A FEW HOURS.

AND SO WILL YOU!

HUFF

WHAT TH'...?

WHY OF ALL TH' NER...

..VE.....

SEVERAL HOURS LATER...

A STRANGE DIRECTIONLESS DAYLIGHT COMES TO THE WORLD, DISPELLING THE SHADOWS OF THE NIGHT, BUT BRINGING LITTLE CHEER TO THIS PARTICULAR REGION.

DOKTOR AKERMAN'S TRAVELLING MONSTER SHOW

AND...

URRGH...

WHA' HOPPEN? WHERE...

...AM...

...I...

?

GOOD MORNING, MY FRIEND. WELCOME TO *HELL*.

MY NAME IS *GREGOR LUPUS*.

HIS ACCENT IS CENTRAL EUROPEAN, LIKE AN EXAGERATED IMPERSONATION OF **BELA LUGOSI**, SO THICK IT MIGHT ALMOST BE COMICAL, IF NOT FOR THEIR SURROUNDINGS.

LUPUS? LUPUS? I KNOW THAT WORD. IT'S *GREEK* OR *LATIN* OR SOME-SUCH FER... *WOLF!*

YEAH, THAT STANDS TA REASON. I ALREADY RUN INTA A *VAMPIRE* AN' A *MUMMY*, AN' BIG GREEN HERE.

SO YOU MUST BE TH' LOCAL *WEREWOLF*.

THAT IS MY CURSE, SIR, AS IT HAS BEEN THE CURSE UPON MY POOR FAMILY FOR TEN GENERATIONS.

BUT... IF YOU HAVE ALREADY ENCOUNTERED THE COUNT AND PRINCE TUT, THAT PERHAPS EXPLAINS WHAT DOCTOR AKERMAN MEANT WHEN HE LOADED YOU IN OUR WAGON.

HE SAID THAT, SINCE YOU WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DESTRUCTION OF TWO OF HIS PRIZE EXHIBITS, YOU MUST REPLACE THEM.

EXHIBITS? YEAH, THAT MAKES A CRAZY KINDA SENSE. WHY ELSE WOULD THEM TWO HAVE BIN IN TH' SAME PLACE?

THEY BOTH ESCAPED FROM SOME KINDA *ZOO!*

AN', SPEAKIN' OF ESCAPE, I THINK IT'S TIME I TRIED MY HAND AT THAT.

BUT BY DOIN' SOMETHIN' A TAD MORE SUBTLE THAN JUST BUSTIN' OUTTA THIS HORSE-COLLAR.

BUT...

WHAT IN THE NAME OF...?? KEMP, MY INSTRUMENTS SHOW A SUDDEN RADICAL MASS CHANGE IN THE CONTAINMENT.

HUH? MUST BE ONE OF OUR PETS UP TO SOME SHENANIGANS.

DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT, DOC. I'LL TEACH THEM TO TOE THE PROPER LINE.

ALL RIGHT, YOU CREEPS. WHAT D' YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING IN...

THERE!!

HELLO DERE...

KLOMP!

KEMP?

KEMP! WHAT IN BLAZES IS GOING ON BACK THERE?

KEMP?

K-UMP!

HIYA! MY NAME'S BEN GRIMM. I THINK IT'S ABOUT TIME YOU AN' ME HAD US A LITTLE *CHAT!*

BOLD TALK, RUFFIAN. BUT CLEARLY YOU DO NOT KNOW WHO YOU DEAL WITH!

I AM *DOCTOR JULIUS AKERMAN--* *THE MONSTER MASTER!!*

AND, INSIDE THE PRISON WAGON...

MY SHACKLES! THEY'VE COME LOOSE!

THIS IS THE MOMENT I HAVE PRAYED FOR! TO BE GIVEN A CHANCE TO MAKE MY ESCAPE IN *DAYLIGHT*, WHILE STILL...

...HUMAN...?

OH NO!

IT *CANNOT* BE HAPPENING *NOW!*

AND JUST OUTSIDE...

SAVE THE TRICKERY FOR THE LOCAL YOKELS, PAL. I BIN UP AGAINST A LOT WORSE THAN YOU AN' COME OUT SMELLIN' LIKE A...

...ROSE..?

RRRRR

HE'S LOOKIN' ABOUT READY TA POUNCE. I BETTER...

YARGH!!

MAN O MAN! HE NEAR TORE MY HEAD OFF AN' I DIDN'T EVEN SEE HIM START TA MOVE!

I DIDN'T THINK ANYONE THIS SIDE A' *QUICKSILVER** COULD BE THAT *FAST!*

* THE MUTANT SPEEDSTER, FORMERLY OF THE **AVENGERS**.

AKERMAN MUSTA TRIGGERED LUPUS INTA TH' CHANGE SOMEHOW. SOME KINDA WITCHERY THAT GETS AROUND THE FACT THAT THERE AIN'T NO FULL MOON OUT.

THAT PROBABLY MEANS THERE AIN'T MUCH A' LUPUS LEFT FOR ME TA TRY T' REASON WITH--AS IF ANYONE COULD REASON WITH A WEREWOLF.

UH-OH. HERE HE COMES AGAIN.

LOOK AT THOSE EYES! THERE'S JUST NOBODY AT HOME IN THERE AT ALL!!

AN' IT'S GONNA BE ALL OVER FER ME IN ABOUT FIVE SECONDS...

UNLESS...

THE NEXT INSTANT...

SORRY GREG.

BUT BELIEVE ME THIS HURTS US BOTH ABOUT EQUAL!

AND, NOT FAR OFF...

HE HAS CHANGED INTO THE ROCK-MONSTER WHO DESTROYED MY OTHER PRIZES!

THE WEREWOLF WILL HAVE TO REDOUBLE HIS EFFORTS. THE HIDE OF SUCH A CREATURE WILL NOT YIELD EASILY TO FANG AND CLAW.

KEMP IS STILL UNCON-SCIOUS.

THE WEREWOLF MUST SUCCEED ON HIS OWN. HE MUST!

HE CONCENTRATES AND THE ARCANE TELEPATHIC COMMANDS LANCE FROM HIM, POUNDING INTO THE BRAIN OF ONE WHO WAS ONCE GREGOR LUPUS.

HIM... AND ONE OTHER...

HURRRR?

LIKE ALL THINGS ON THIS MAKE-BELIEVE WORLD HE IS A CREATION OF THE IMAGINATION, THE UNCONSCIOUS MIND OF BEN GRIMM.

BUT ALSO LIKE THE REST OF THIS WORLD HE IS VESTED WITH A BRAIN--ALBEIT A DAMAGED ONE--THIS IS AS REAL IN ITS OWN WAY AS ANY OF THE TEEMING MILLIONS OF FAR OFF EARTH.

BLAST IT! I KNOW ALL THIS AIN'T REAL, BUT NO MATTER HOW HARD I TRY TA CONVINCE MYSELF I JUST CAN'T CUT LOOSE AGAINST ANOTHER LIVING CREATURE--NOT WITH MY FULL STRENGTH.

AN' IT DON'T LOOK LIKE NOTHIN' LESS IS GONNA STOP THIS REFUGEE FROM A RUG FACTORY.

THE ROCK-THING IS WEAKENING. KILL, LUPUS! KILL KILL KILL!!!

ENGLESTAD

CURSE THE FOOL FOR THE STUPID BEAST HE IS! HE WASTES ENERGY ON...

...EH?

STRAK

NO!

LET GO OF ME! LET GO OF ME! I AM YOUR MASTER! I COMMAND YOU!

I COMMAND YOU!

BUT THE PATCHWORK CREATURE SEEMS NOT TO HEAR.

SOMETHING DEEP WITHIN HIS HEAVY-LIDDED EYES SEEMS TO STIR, TO FLICKER LIKE THE LAST EMBERS OF AN ANCIENT FIRE.

PERHAPS IT IS A MEMORY. A FRAIL AND FLEETING THING DRAWN FROM A DOZEN PAST LIVES, SEPARATE AND DISTINCT.

AND THEN...

IMMEDIATELY...

IT IS A MIRACLE!

I AM MYSELF AGAIN! *HUMAN!*

AND WITHOUT HAVING HAD TO TASTE OF HUMAN BLOOD!

OH... BOY.../ LOOKS LIKE THIS LITTLE SCENE JUST GOT EXTREMELY NASTY. BIG GREEN'S ACED THE DOC...

AN' THAT MEANS THERE AIN'T NO WAY TA *CONTROL* HIM...

PONDEROUSLY THE LIVING CARICATURE LUMBERS FORWARD...

BUT, WHEN HE REACHES THE THING...

SUNNUVAGUN! LOOKS LIKE HE WANTS TA BE *PALS!!*

SHORTLY THERE-AFTER...

I REPEAT AGAIN MY WISH THAT YOU WOULD LET US ACCOMPANY YOU, FRIEND BENJAMIN.

YOU WILL BE HEADING INTO DANGEROUS REALMS.

YOU GOT A REAL KNACK FOR UNDER-STATEMENT THERE GREG.

BUT, NO. THANKS ALL TH' SAME, BUT IF I'M EVER GONNA FIND MY MISSIN' LADYFRIEND*, IT'S GONNA HAFTA BE ON MY LONESOME TRY TA UNDERSTAND...

I WILL...I *DO*. IT MAKES ME SAD. IT IS RARE ON THIS WORLD TO MEET ONE WHO CAN TRULY SAY "FRIEND" TO SUCH AS US.

*DON'T MISS *THE THING* # 20 FOR MORE.

YEAH, WELL I LEARNED A LONG TIME AGO NOT TA JUDGE FOLKS BY WHAT THEY LOOK LIKE.

SO LONG, YOU TWO. TAKE CARE, Y'HEAR?

TOO BAD I HAD TA LEAVE 'EM BEHIND. I MIGHT BE ABLE TA MAKE USE OF SOME EXTRA MUSCLE WHEN I FIND *TARI*. BUT I AIN'T SO SURE IT'S JUST MY BRAIN THAT'S RUNNIN' THIS JOINT. AN' IF THERE *IS* SOME-BODY ELSE PULLING SOME OF TH' STRINGS, GREG AN' BIG GREEN MIGHT JUST AS EASILY END UP *AGAINST* ME AS *FOR* ME.

THEY STAND A MOMENT, WATCHING THE FIGURE OF BEN GRIMM DWINDLE TOWARDS THE HORIZON.

THEN THEY TURN AND STRIDE OFF INTO THE FOG THAT ROLLS ABOUT THEM.

AND, WHEN THE FOG CLEARS...

...IT IS AS IF THEY HAD NEVER BEEN.

EPILOG:

NEW YORK, NEW YORK. THE BAXTER BUILDING STANDS, NOW, SILENT AND EMPTY.

BUT NOT AT PEACE.

SLIPPING WITH CARELESS EASE PAST A HUNDRED ALARM SENSORS A TINY DEVICE MOVES THROUGH THE DESERTED HALLS.

HERE AND THERE IT PAUSES, A MICRO-DRILL BORING INVISIBLY SMALL HOLES IN THE MANY COMPLEX MECHANISMS, INSERTING STRANGE COMPONENTS...

...ALTERING.

UNTIL ITS SEEMINGLY RANDOM TRAVELS BRING IT HERE, TO THE E.T.C.C. * FACILITY...

*EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL CONTAMINATION CONTAINMENT.

IT SENSES LIFE WITHIN THE GLEAMING PLASTEEL CYLINDER--A KIND OF LIFE, AT LEAST.

ALIEN.

HOSTILE.

AND SOMETHING ELSE. SOMETHING THAT TOUCHES AGAINST ITS MICRO-CIRCUITS LIKE THE TICKLE OF TINY, ELFIN FINGERS.

AS IF SOMEONE... SOMETHING WERE TRYING TO... MAKE A SUGGESTION?

THE FAINT PROMPTING HAS NO EFFECT, BUT IT DOES SEEM WORTH FURTHER INVESTIGATION...

NEXT ISSUE: SHE HULK IS ONE LADY YOU'D RATHER HAVE **FOR** YE THAN **'AGIN'** YE--AS A CERTAIN SLEAZOID PUBLISHER FINDS OUT IN... THE **NAKED TRUTH** BE HERE IN 30 DAYS!!

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HEY GUYS--

--WHAT'S BIG AND GREEN AND HAS A STAPLE IN HER NAVEL?

BY JOHN BYRNE

Stan Lee PRESENTS:

THE NAKED TRUTH

THE BAXTER BUILDING. NEW YORK CITY. 12:47 PM. MONDAY.

WHAT IN THE WORLD...?

A SPECIAL HAT TIP TO **KEVIN NOWLAN** FOR THE INSPIRATION FOR THIS STORY.* *SEE LETTERS PAGE FOR MORE INFO.

JOHN BYRNE - WRITER & PENCILER
AL GORDON - GUEST INKER
GLYNIS WEIN - COLORIST
JIM NOVAK - LETTERER
MICHAEL CARLIN - EDITOR
JIM SHOOTER - TRUTHSAYER

WHERE'S ALL THIS *WIND* COMING...

...FROM...?

THERE, SEE? I TOLDJA!

EVERY DAY FOR TH' PAST MONTH SHE'S BEEN *SUNNIN'* HER-SELF ON TH' ROOF.

EXIT

EXIT

YEAH, BUT SO WHAT? SHE AIN'T NO USE TO ME COVERED UP LIKE *THAT!*

DON'T SWEAT IT. TH' WASH FROM OUR BIG OL' FAN SHOULD TAKE CARE OF TH' NECESSARY *DETAILS!*

WATCH!

HEY!

HEY! WHADDAYA THINK YOU'RE DOING? GET AWAY FROM HERE! THIS IS A SECURITY...

OH, FOR...!!

THERE!

NOW! QUICK! WHILE SHE'S OFF BALANCE! GET YOUR *PICTURES!*

DON'T TELL ME MY JOB, COOLEY!

I'M *WAY* AHEAD OF YA!

OKAY! I GOT SOME *BEAUTS!* GET US OUTTA HERE!

WE'RE ALREADY *GONE*, MAN!

I DON'T *BELIEVE* IT!

HERE I WAS ALL BRACED FOR A SUPER-BADDIE, AND I END UP GETTING PHOTO-GRAPHED *DÉSHABILLÉE* BY AN AIRBORNE PEEPING-TOM.

WELL, NOT SO FAST, BRIGHT BOYS!

SHE-HULK WOULD LIKE A FEW WORDS WITH YOU!

HOLY COW!

COOLEY! DO SOME-THING!!

OKAY, GUYS, LET'S *LAND* AND DISCUSS THIS, SHALL WE?

I MEAN... YOU DON'T LOOK THE TYPES TO LEAVE A GAL HANGING!

HEY! YOU GUYS LISTENING UP THERE? I DON'T WANT TO HAVE TO START *DISMAN-TLING* THIS EGG-BEATER.

WRENCH

HOLD TIGHT, VANCE! I'M GONNA TRY AN' *SPIN* HER OFF!

HEY!

MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE BAXTER BUILDING...

HERE WE GO, JEN. I'VE FOUND THAT ARTICLE I WAS TELLING YOU ABOUT.

JEN?

HIS NAME IS **WYATT WINGFOOT.** HE IS A LONG TIME FRIEND TO THE FANTASTIC FOUR, AND WOULD NOW BE **CHIEF** OF ONE OF THE MOST ADVANCED TRIBES OF INDIANS IN THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST HAD HE NOT DECIDED TO RETURN TO NEW YORK WITH THE HEROES.

IT WAS LONGING FOR THE LIFE OF ACTION HE HAD ONCE KNOWN THAT BROUGHT HIM BACK TO HIS FAMOUS FRIENDS.

THAT LONGING HAS NOT GONE UNFULFILLED.

JEN!!

WHAT IN BLAZES IS GOING ON? THAT HELICOPTER DOESN'T LOOK LIKE THE KIND OF HARDWARE I'D NORMALLY ASSOCIATE WITH THE FF'S ENEMIES.

IN FACT, IT LOOKS LIKE SOMETHING JEN SHOULD BE ABLE TO HANDLE ALONE, WITH NO DIFFICULTY.

STILL, JUST TO BE ON THE SAFE SIDE...

I THINK I'LL KEEP A CLOSER WATCH ON THE PROCEEDINGS.

MEANWHILE...

BOY, THESE JOKERS REALLY AREN'T INTERESTED IN PLAYING FAIR, ARE THEY?

I GUESS THAT'S ONE OF THE PROBLEMS WITH BEING A GOOD GUY.

NOBODY TAKES YOU SERIOUSLY WHEN YOU THREATEN MAJOR CARNAGE.

EVERYONE ALWAYS ASSUMES YOU'VE GOT TO PLAY NICE.

GUESS I'D BETTER ENLIGHTEN THEM, JUST A TAD.

HEY! WHERE'D SHE GO? I CAN'T SEE HER ANY...

E-YAH!!

WXIT

WXIT

CRUNCH

SHE'S BUSTIN' THROUGH! SHE'S BUSTIN' THROUGH!!

RELAX! RELAX! I GOT ONE MORE ACE T' PLAY!

THEY'VE STOPPED SPINNING.

WHAT ARE THEY...

...OH NUTS...

LOOK OUT!!

IT'S HER! IT'S THE *SHE-HULK!* SHE'S ONE OF THE *AVENGERS!*

NO! DIDN'T YOU HEAR? SHE JOINED THE FANTASTIC FOUR BACK WHEN ALL THE SUPER-HEROES VANISHED A WHILE AGO.

JUST OUT-SIDE...

FROM THE SPEED SHE WAS GOING WHEN SHE HIT THE SIDE OF THAT BUILDING, JEN MUST HAVE PENETRATED QUITE A WAYS IN.

SHE-HULK! CAN YOU HEAR ME? ARE YOU ALRIGHT?

WYATT! MY FAVORITE INDIAN BRAVE TO THE RESCUE!

C'MON CLOSER, GOOD LOOKIN'...

WE'VE GOT US A HELICOPTER TO CATCH!

JEN, YOU'VE GOT TO BE KIDDING!

THIS IS *NEW YORK!* THE SKY IS *FILLED* WITH HELICOPTERS.

WHICH ONE DO YOU WANT ME TO CHASE?

DRAT! ALL RIGHT, THERE'S MORE THAN ONE WAY TO SKIN A PEEPING TOMCAT. I'M STILL A *LAWYER*...

...AND THAT MEANS I'M TEN PERCENT *PRIVATE EYE.*

"BACK TO THE BAXTER BUILDING, KIDDO. I'VE GOT A PHONE CALL TO MAKE!"

MR. WATKINS, THERE'S A *JENNIFER WALTERS* CALLING FOR YOU.

SHE SAYS SHE'S THE LAWYER FOR THE FANTASTIC FOUR.

ALL RIGHT, PUT HER THROUGH, HIDEKO.

BILL WATKINS HERE. HOW CAN I HELP YOU MS. WALTERS?

OUR TRAFFIC 'COPTER? WHY YES, THAT *WOULD* BE UP AROUND THIS HOUR.

THE PILOT? USUALLY IT'S COOLEY. DAN COOLEY. YES. NO, WE HAVE OUR OWN PRIVATE LANDING-FIELD OVER IN JERSEY.

COULD YOU GIVE ME THE ADDRESS?

...THANK YOU MR. WATKINS. WE'LL BE IN TOUCH. GOOD-BYE.

SUCCESS?

OF A KIND, AT LEAST IT'S A *LEAD*. BUT I THINK I'LL SLIP INTO SOMETHING MORE... *PROFESSIONAL* BEFORE I FOLLOW IT UP.

THEN LET'S YOU AND I TAKE A LITTLE TRIP TO JERSEY...

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED?

ALWAYS. LEAD ON.

TWENTY MINUTES LATER...

O MAN, O MAN, O MAN! THE BOSS IS GONNA HAVE *KITTENS* FOR SURE!

HOW'M I GONNA *EXPLAIN* ALL THIS?

A-HEM!

WHO...?

...OH NO...

ER... SEE YA AROUND, FOLKS. I GOTTA GO...

ERK!

ONE MOMENT OF YOUR PRECIOUS TIME, PAL.

I BELIEVE YOU MAY JUST HAVE SOME INFORMATION FOR ME?

...INFORMA-TION...?

WYATT

WYATT

YES. LIKE THE *NAME* OF YOUR NOSEY LITTLE FRIEND WITH THE *CAMERA.*

AND WHERE I CAN *FIND* HIM.

O-O-O-H! GEEZ! I *CAN'T* TELL YOU THAT, LADY! IF I DO I WON'T GET THE THOU-SAND BUCKS HE PROMISED...

...AN' I'M GONNA NEED THAT *BREAD* TO COVER THE DAMAGE YOU DONE TO THE CHOPPER.

IF THE BOSS FINDS OUT WHAT HAPPENED HE'LL *CAN* ME SURE!

OH, *REALLY*? WYATT, HOLD THIS TURKEY FOR A MOMENT, WILL YOU PLEASE?

MY PLEASURE.

4

NOW, HOW *HARD* D'YOU THINK THIS WILL *HIT* IF I TOSS IT, OH, SAY TWO OR THREE HUNDRED FEET STRAIGHT *UP*?

NO! NO!

I'LL TALK! I'LL *TALK!*

NOT QUITE MEANWHILE...

JOHNNY? ARE YOU HERE?

IN THE KITCHEN, ALICIA!

ARE YOU ALL RIGHT, JOHNNY? YOU SOUND...?

I'M... OKAY. I... I... I'M ***SORRY*** ABOUT LAST NIGHT, ALICIA.

SORRY? I DON'T UNDERSTAND. WHAT IS THERE TO BE SORRY FOR...?

UNLESS... YOU'RE SORRY IT ***HAPPENED?***

NO, NO! I DON'T MEAN THAT. HONEST I DON'T. I WAS ...I MEAN, YOU'RE... I MEAN...

DARNIT, ALICIA, I ...I CAN'T HELP BUT FEEL I... TOOK ADVANTAGE OF OUR ***FRIENDSHIP.***

OH, JOHNNY...

HOW CAN YOU THINK SUCH A THING? WE'RE NEITHER OF US CHILDREN, JOHNNY. WHAT HAPPENED WAS ***BEAUTIFUL***, AND IT HAPPENED BECAUSE WE ***BOTH*** WANTED IT TO HAPPEN.

DON'T SPOIL IT WITH ***NEEDLESS*** RECRIMINATIONS...

NOW, LET US TURN OUR ATTENTION AWAY FROM THIS MOST SIGNIFICANT EVENT IN THE LIVES OF JOHNNY STORM (A.K.A. ***THE HUMAN TORCH***), AND THE BEAUTIFUL, BLIND ALICIA MASTERS, AND LOOK ACROSS TOWN TO ONE OF THE LESS GLAMOROUS CORNERS OF BROADWAY'S ***GREAT WHITE WAY***...

YOU'RE ***SURE*** YOU WANT TO HANDLE IT THIS WAY, JEN?

anon

"M"

BIG GUN

PUBLIC SALE

NEWSPAPERS

IT'S REALLY MY ONLY OPTION, WYATT. THERE ARE ***LAWS*** IN THIS COUNTRY, AND BEFORE ALL ELSE FAILS IT'S WISE TO ***USE*** THEM AS BEST WE CAN.

MM. STILL I ***WORRY*** ABOUT YOU CONFRONTING THIS ***VANCE*** PERSON LIKE... WELL, LIKE ***THIS.***

YOU'RE VERY SWEET-- BUT WITH ***YOU*** PLAYING BODYGUARD I DOUBT I HAVE MUCH TO WORRY ABOUT.

UNLESS IT'S CATCHING SOME DREAD INFECTION FROM TOUCHING THE ELEVATOR BUTTON. I LOVE NEW YORK, BUT PLACES LIKE THIS ***DO*** MAKE ME LONG FOR SUNNY CALIFORNIA.

TESS X-MEN LOVE U

OH, I'M SURE THERE ARE... SHALL WE SAY, ***LESS DELIGHTFUL*** PLACES EVEN THERE.

I'VE SEEN SOME OF THE MOST FABULOUS LOCALES, ON AND OFF EARTH, AND, SADLY, THEY ALL SEEM TO HAVE THEIR SEAMIER SIDE.

SCOOP!

DAVE MICHELINIE'S SLUM

W. METE DeCONNEL

KILL THE CAPTAIN!

M. DUNE

I SUPPOSE. IT'S JUST THAT NEW YORK SEEMS TO HAVE CORNERED THE MARKET ON *SLEAZE.*

OH, WELL, PART AND PARCEL OF BEING CAPITAL OF THE WORLD, I SUPPOSE. THE BEST AND WORST OF EVERYTHING!

U21

AND SPEAKING OF THE WORST, THERE'S OUR TARGET FOR TODAY.

THE NAKED TRUTH

"THE NAKED TRUTH." BOY, IT REALLY *HAD* TO BE THIS PARTICULAR RAG, DIDN'T IT? I MEAN, IT ONLY MAKES *HUSTLER* LOOK LIKE THE *CONGRESSIONAL REPORT.*

THE NAKED TRUTH

T.J. VANCE EDITOR & PUBLISHER

COME IN

...?

CAN I HELP YOU?

YES, I CALLED EARLIER FOR AN... APPOINTMENT WITH MR. VANCE. I'M *JENNIFER WALTERS.*

THE NAKED TRUTH

TRUTH SCREAM

JENNY!

SWEETY-HONEY-BABY! GLAD TO MEETCHA!

C'MON RIGHT IN!

THE NAKED TRUTH

THERESA MARQUCH TAKES IT ALL OFF!!

T.J. VANCE I TAKE IT. I'M SURPRISED YOU'RE ***HAPPY*** TO SEE ME, MR. VANCE!

CALL ME ***TEEJ***, BABY. EVERYBODY DOES. JUST ***EVERYBODY.***

AND WHY SHOULDN'T I BE HAPPY TO SEE YOU? I'VE ALWAYS HAD A ***SOLID*** RELATIONSHIP WITH THE MEMBERS OF YOUR PROFESSION.

YOU PROBABLY SAW OUR PICTORIAL LAST YEAR? "THE LADIES OF THE LAW." BEAUTIFUL!

NO, I MUST HAVE... MISSED THAT ONE.

TOO BAD. 'COURSE THEY WERE ALL JUST LEGAL SECRETARIES, AN' MOST OF 'EM UNEMPLOYED AT THAT. BUT IT WAS THE KIND OF CLASSY FEATURE WE PRIDE OURSELVES ON, HERE AT T.N.T.!

ER... LISTEN, GERONIMO, WHYN'T YOU STAY OUT HERE WHILE JENNY-POO AN' ME CHAT IT UP INSIDE?

I WOULD PREFER TO ACCOMPANY MISS WALTERS...

...IF YOU DON'T MIND.

UMM... SURE. SURE. NO PROB. COME ON IN.

MY ***SANCTUM SANCTORUM.*** NERVE CENTER OF THE WHOLE OPERATION.

EXCUSE THE MESS, BUT GETTIN' OUT A MONTHLY MAG DOESN'T LEAVE MUCH TIME FOR HOUSEKEEPING.

I SUPPOSE NOT. NOW, MR. VANCE...

TEEJ, BABY. CALL ME TEEJ.

MISTER VANCE, AS YOU KNOW I AM THE LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE ***SHE-HULK***, AND IT IS ON HER BEHALF THAT WE HAVE COME HERE THIS AFTERNOON.

DON'T I KNOW IT? BUT WHAT'S THE PROB?

"THE P...?" MR. VANCE, SURELY YOU ARE NOT GOING TO ***DENY*** YOU HAVE UNAUTHORIZED PHOTOGRAPHS OF MY CLIENT?

NAKED

WHAT'S TO DENY? SWEETY-BABY, WHY ***SHOULD*** I DENY IT? I TOOK 'EM MY-SELF--AND SOME OF MY BEST WORK THEY ARE, TOO.

FULL COLOR AND ***FABULOSO!***

THEN, LET'S NOT ***FENCE*** WITH EACH OTHER, SHALL WE, MR. VANCE?

AS THE LEGAL REP-RESENTATIVE OF THE SHE-HULK I ***DEMAND*** THE SURRENDER BY YOU OF ALL FILM, NEGA-TIVES AND/OR PRINTS WHICH MAY EXIST OF THOSE PHOTOS.

NICE SPIEL, TOOTS, BUT YOU'RE WASTING YOUR TIME. I DON'T SUR-RENDER THOSE PRINTS TO NOBODY, NO HOW.

YOU MIGHT AS WELL ASK ME TO STAND ON A STREET CORNER AND GIVE ALL MY MONEY AWAY.

WHY, THIS IS GONNA BE BIGGER THAN THE ***VANESSA WILLIAMS*** SCOOP--AND I DO MEAN ***BIGGER!***

THE NAKED TRUTH

PERHAPS I SHOULD WARN YOU, MR. VANCE, THAT MY CLIENT IS A MEMBER, UNDER HER REAL NAME, OF ALL THE VARIOUS SHOW BUSINESS UNIONS, SAG, AFTRA AND EQUITY.

IF YOU PUBLISH THOSE PHOTOGRAPHS WITHOUT A RELEASE SIGNED BY HER, OR WITHOUT PAYING HER THE MINIMUM ESTABLISHED SCALE, YOU WILL FIND YOURSELF FACING THE FULL FORCE OF THOSE ORGANIZATIONS.

WHAT? ***ED ASNER'S*** GONNA COME AN' LEAN ON ME? LOOK, CUTES, I'VE BEEN PETER POLITE UP UNTIL NOW, BUT MAY-BE IT'S TIME YOU LEARNED THE FACTS OF LIFE.

THE SHE-HULK HAPPENS TO BE A ***PUBLIC FIGURE***, LADY. THAT PUTS HER RIGHT UP THERE WITH JACKIE ONASSIS AN' GRETA GARBO. AN' IF CLASSY DAMES LIKE THEM CAN'T STOP US PRINTING PICTURES OF THEM IN' TH' BUFF...

...THEN SHE-HULK BETTER GET USED TO THE IDEA ***SHE*** CAN'T GO 'ROUND EXPOSING HERSELF IN PUBLIC NEITHER!

I WAS ***NOT*** EXPOSING... I MEAN... MY CLIENT WAS ON TOP OF A THIRTY-FIVE STORY BUILDING, AND DISCRETELY COVERED UNTIL YOU CAME ALONG WITH YOUR HELICOPTER.

TELL IT TO THE MARINES, SNOOKS.

SHE'S A PUBLIC FIGURE, AN' THAT MEANS SHE'S IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN. SAME PRINCIPLE AS THE SCANDAL RAGS USE TO PRINT THEIR LIES.

'CEPT OUR PICTURES AIN'T LIES. WE GOT SHOTS OF THE SHE-HULK IN THE ALTOGETHER, AND THAT'S ALL THE PROOF WE NEED FOR OUR STORY.

THIS IS THE SWEETEST DEAL THAT EVER BLEW MY WAY, BABY, AN' THERE'S NO WAY YOU'RE GONNA MESS IT UP FOR ME. THEM PICTURES ARE ALREADY ON THEIR WAY TO A ***WAITING ISSUE*** OF T.N.T., RIGHT ON THE PRESSES.

AND I'VE ALREADY ***PRE-SOLD*** THREE MILLION COPIES! ALL THEM NEWS-AGENTS SNAPPED UP THE RUN JUST ON TH' CHANCE I'D GET TH' PICTURES LIKE I PROMISED.

THE NAKED TRUTH

THREE MILLION! THIS MAG AIN'T NEVER SOLD MORE THAN A HUNNERT THOUSAND A MONTH IN TEN YEARS PUBLISHING!

AN' ALL THEM CHECKS AN' GREENBACKS ARE RIGHT HERE IN MY SAFE, SO IF SHE-HULK WANTS HER SHARE...

...SHE CAN JUST GO ***WHISTLE*** FOR IT!

SLAM

BUT LOOK... I'M A SWEET GUY. ASK ANYBODY. I DON'T WANT YOUR TRIP HERE TO HAVE BEEN A TOTAL WASTE. MAYBE WE CAN WORK OUT A *PRIVATE* DEAL, JUST YOU AN' ME.

I'M... NOT SURE I FOLLOW YOU, VANCE.

IT'S SIMPLE, SWEET-THING!

YOU LOOK LIKE YOU PROBABLY GOT A PRETTY GOOD *BUILT* UNDER THEM PLAIN-JANE DUDS. LITTLE ON THE SKINNY SIDE FOR MY TASTES, BUT...

YOU'RE NOT SUGGESTING...?

WHY NOT? THE F.F.'S LAWYER? HEY, I'LL EVEN GIVE YOU COVER BILLING!

WHY... YOU... SLIMY... LITTLE... *WORM!* I'VE ALWAYS BEEN AGAINST CENSORSHIP OF ANY KIND...

...BUT CREEPS LIKE YOU MAKE A GOOD ARGUMENT FOR *BOOK-BURNING!*

NOW YOU LISTEN HERE, DOLL. DON'T YOU GO MOUTHIN' OFF AT ME. I BEEN REAL CIVIL WITH YOU, AN' IF YOU SAY ONE WORD AGAINST ME...

...YOU'LL...

RRRRRR

...BE...

RRRRR

...SORRY...

RRIP!

YOU... YOU'RE *HER*... I MEAN *SHE*... I MEAN...

...DON'T YOU *TOUCH* ME! YOU LAY ONE FINGER ON ME AND I'LL *SUE* YOU! *I'LL SUE YOU!*

OH, I'M NOT GOING TO TOUCH *YOU*, VANCY-POO! I WOULDN'T WANT TO RISK GETTING *SLIME* ON MY BARE HANDS!

NO, I'M GOING TO DO YOU A BIG *FAVOR*. SEE, I'M WORRIED ABOUT YOU HAVING ALL THIS MONEY, LYING AROUND.

MY SAFE! IF YOU BUST INTO IT, IT'S A FELONY! I'LL HAVE YOU THROWN IN JAIL!

CALM DOWN, SWEETY-BABY!

I'M NOT GOING TO BREAK OPEN YOUR SAFE.

I'M GOING TO *IMPROVE* IT FOR YOU.

TROJAN LTD

GRUNK

THERE, ISN'T THAT BETTER? NOW NO ONE WILL BE ABLE TO GET AT ALL YOUR LOVELY LOOT.

HERE YOU GO...

CRASH!

C'MON, WYATT. I SAW A *BIG BUN* DOWN THE BLOCK. YOU CAN BUY ME A HAMBURGER AND HELP CHEER ME UP.

CHEER YOU UP? BUT, SURELY YOU'VE *WON*, JEN?

A *PYRRHIC VICTORY* AT BEST, LOVER. I CAN'T GO OUT AND SMASH THE PRESSES, OR BREAK UP THE DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM.

SO, ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, THOSE PICTURES ARE STILL GOING TO SEE *PRINT*.

SCUM

EPILOG: THREE WEEKS LATER

AT THE BAXTER BUILDING...

SUE? ARE YOU ALL RIGHT, DARLING? I'VE BEEN CALLING AND CALLING.

OH, REED. I'M SORRY. I'VE JUST BEEN... WATCHING FRANKLIN. HE LOOKS SO... SO ***NORMAL*** PLAYING WITH HIS TOYS. IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE THAT ONLY TWO DAYS AGO...

BEST NOT TO THINK ABOUT IT, MY LOVE. WE HAVE ALL JUST PASSED THROUGH A ***GAUNTLET*** THAT DEFIES CONVENTIONAL ANALYSIS. BROODING ON IT CAN ONLY MAKE THINGS WORSE.

4½

COME--WE STILL HAVE OUR TICKETS TO SEE "LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS" TONIGHT. THE WISEST THING WE CAN DO IS CLING TO THOSE EVERYDAY PLANS WE MADE BEFORE...

AH, SHE-HULK. YOU LOOK DEPRESSED, TOO. IS EVERYTHING ALL RIGHT?

WELL, THAT'S A DEBATABLE POINT AFTER THE LAST FEW DAYS, I'D SAY, BUT...

YES, I'M A LITTLE DOWN. TODAY'S THE DAY THAT WRETCHED ***MAGAZINE*** HITS THE NEWSTANDS.

IS THAT WHY YOU'RE ***BLUE***, GREEN?

THEN HERE'S SOMETHING TO CHEER YOU UP. A COPY OF THE MAG ITSELF.

THAT'S NOT VERY FUNNY, TORCH.

OH, BUT IT *IS*, JENNY, IT *IS*! REMEMBER HOW YOU TOLD US WHAT A BIG RUSH THAT VANCE CREEP WAS IN TO GET YOUR PICTURES INTO PRINT?

WELL, LOOKS LIKE HE WAS IN *SUCH* A RUSH HE NEGLECTED TO TELL HIS PRINTERS THEY WERE PICTURES OF A *GREEN* LADY...

...SO THEY *COLOR-CORRECTED* 'EM!

AND *VOILA!*

SAME THING HAPPENED TO AN EARLY *STAR TREK* EPISODE!

! THEY'RE *ALL* LIKE THAT! IT JUST LOOKS LIKE ORDINARY WHITE SKIN! YOU CAN'T EVEN TELL IT'S *ME!* THERE'S NOTHING TO GIVE IT *SCALE!*

THE NAKED TRUTH SPECIAL SHE-HULK

TORCHIE... I COULD *KISS* YA!

HEY, I'M FLATTERED, BUT I'M JUST THE BEARER OF THE GLAD TIDINGS, SHULKIE. SAVE THE SMOOCHES FOR WYATT!

NOW, IF I CAN HAVE THAT MAG BACK, I THINK I HAVE A PAIR OF *GREEN-TINTED* SUN-GLASSES IN MY OLD ROOM, HERE.

SURE THING, JOHNNY. I...

...GREEN...

...TINTED...?

HEY!

COME BACK HERE WITH THAT!

NEXT ISSUE: WHAT *WERE* THE GRIM EVENTS OF THE LAST FEW DAYS, ALLUDED TO BY *REED* AND *SUSAN RICHARDS*? FIND OUT, BEGINNING *NEXT MONTH* IN A TALE CALLED...

SUFFER A WITCH TO LIVE...

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THE WORLD'S GREATEST COMIC MAGAZINE!

Fantastic Four®

Evening of the Witch

JOHN BYRNE

SUFFER A WITCH TO LIVE...

WINTER WRAPS HER OFF-WHITE BLANKET OVER MANHATTAN, AND IN THE SKY ABOVE THIS GREATEST OF THE WORLD'S GREAT CITIES...

I CAN'T BELIEVE THIS IS REALLY HAPPENING!

Stan Lee PRESENTS AN ALL-STAR FEATURE BY: • JOHN BYRNE SCRIPT & PENCILS • GLYNIS WEIN COLORS • JOHN WORKMAN LETTERS • MICHAEL CARLIN EDITING • JIM SHOOTER EDITOR IN CHIEF • AND INTRODUCING THE INKING WIZARDRY OF: JERRY ORDWAY!!!

SEEMS LIKE I'VE SPENT HALF MY LIFE CHASIN' THE LADIES, AND GETTING MY HEART GROUND TO HAMBURGER FOR MY TROUBLES.

BUT NOW, AT LAST, IT'S FINALLY *REALLY* HAPPENED!

I'M IN LOVE!

HEAR THAT, WORLD?

THE HUMAN TORCH IS IN LOVE!

AND IT'S *REAL* THIS TIME. I KNOW IT. I CAN *FEEL* IT.

DORRIE EVANS, CRYSTAL, FRANKIE RAYE--EVEN JULIE ANGEL--THEY ALL HAD SOMETHING, AND WHAT I FELT FOR THEM WAS GENUINE...

BUT IT WASN'T LIKE THIS WITH ANY OF THEM.

THAT'S HOW I KNOW IT'S REAL. BECAUSE WHAT I FELT BEFORE WAS LIKE A PHOTOGRAPH COMPARED TO AN ORIGINAL OIL PAINTING...

NO COMPARISON!

HA! HA!

IT'S EVEN EDUCATIONAL! THAT'S A REFERENCE I WOULDN'T HAVE MADE TWO WEEKS AGO!

MAN-O-MAN! WHO'DA THUNK IT? JONATHAN S. STORM, THE ORIGINAL DUMB BLOND, MALE DIVISION!

SUDDENLY I FEEL LIKE I ACTUALLY *LIVE* ON THIS FUNKY OL' PLANET, INSTEAD OF JUST VISITING!

THE SLIGHTEST CONCENTRATION DOUSES THE BLAZING YOUTH'S FLAME, AND...

...HE SETTLES LIGHTLY TO THE ROOFTOP BELOW.

IN FACT, THE ONLY POTENTIAL FLY IN THE OINTMENT IS ***WHO IT IS*** I'VE GONE AND LOST MY HEART TO.

ALICIA.

MOST OF THE WORLD SEEMS TO THINK HER FULL NAME IS "ALICIA MASTERS THE THING'S GIRL-FRIEND."

BUT THE ***THING*** HAS BEEN OFF ON THE PLANET OF THE "SECRET WARS" FOR MONTHS NOW, SORTING HIS LIFE OUT.

WHILE ALICIA'S BEEN DOING SOME SERIOUS RE-EVALUATING OF THEIR RELATIONSHIP ON HER OWN.

SHE STILL LOVES HIM, AND ALWAYS WILL, BUT IT'S GROWN INTO A DIFFERENT KIND OF LOVE NOW.

NOT LIKE THE LOVE SHE HAS FOR ***ME!***

ALICIA? ARE YOU HOME?

OVER HERE, JOHNNY. DINNER'S ALMOST READY.

BUT FIRST...

MEANWHILE...

...JUST A FEW BLOCKS ACROSS TOWN TO THE **BAXTER BUILDING,** HEADQUARTERS OF THE FABULOUS **FANTASTIC FOUR,** WHERE...

WHENEVER YOU'RE READY, **SHE-HULK.**

OKAY... AND ONE... AND TWO... AND...

...THREE!

VERY GOOD, **JEN.** THAT'S AN EQUIVALENT OF **SEVENTY FIVE TONS** YOU'RE LIFTING.

FIVE FULL TONS OVER YOUR PREVIOUSLY ASSESSED MAXIMUM.

QUITE AN IMPROVEMENT!

FOONF!

YEH... YOU COULD CALL IT THAT.

IF I CAN KEEP BOOSTING MY STRENGTH LEVEL AT THIS CONSTANT RATE, I SHOULD SOON BE IN THE *THING'S* CLASS.

THAT'S ASSUMING I DON'T WEAR MYSELF AWAY TO NOTHING, WORKING ON HIS EQUIPMENT.

NOBODY EVER TOLD ME BEING A SUPER HERO WAS GOING TO BE SUCH HARD WORK.

I'M SURE THERE'S NO DANGER OF YOU WASTING AWAY JUST YET. IN FACT, REED FEELS YOU HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO MATCH THE ALMOST LIMITLESS POWER OF THE *HULK!*

AND MAYBE RUNNING THE RISK OF LOSING MY HUMANITY TO THE *MONSTER,* THE WAY MY COUSIN BRUCE DID?*

I WONDER IF IT'S REALLY WORTH IT?

*BRUCE BANNER, NOW TRAPPED FOREVER IN THE BODY OF THE *HULK.*

BUT THAT'S NOT THE SORT OF THING TO BE WORRYING ABOUT ON A NIGHT LIKE THIS.

I'M FOR A NICE HOT SAUNA, AND THEN I COULD USE THOSE MAGIC FINGERS OF YOURS AGAIN...

I THINK YOU'RE BECOMING *ADDICTED* TO MY ANCIENT TRIBAL MASSAGE TECHNIQUES, MISS WALTERS.

BUT... ALL RIGHT. WYATT WINGFOOT IS YOURS TO COMMAND...

NOW, BEFORE YOU BEGIN TO THINK YOU'VE PICKED UP A COPY OF "OUR LOVE STORY" BY MISTAKE, LET'S TURN OUR ATTENTION TO THE REMAINING MEMBERS OF OUR FAMOUS QUARTET, SPECIFICALLY LOOKING SOME ONE HUNDRED MILES NORTH AND EAST OF MANHATTAN, TO THE QUAINT CONNECTICUT VILLAGE OF BELLE PORTE...

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...AND THIS COZY HOME ON ONE OF THE NATION'S OLDEST STREETS.

HELLO!

PLEASE COME IN, WON'T YOU? I'M SUSAN BENJAMIN.

PLEASED TO MEET YOU, MRS. BENJAMIN. I'M HYRAM FIELDSTONE AND THIS IS MY WIFE, LOIS.

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR INVITING US TO YOUR PARTY, MRS. BENJAMIN. WITH FOUR KIDS I ALMOST ***NEVER*** GET OUT OF THE HOUSE.

OH, PLEASE CALL ME ***SUE.*** I'M GLAD YOU COULD COME. MY HUSBAND AND I HAVE BEEN SO LOOKING FORWARD TO THIS OPPORTUNITY TO MEET WITH ALL OUR NEIGHBORS AT LAST.

I IMAGINE YOU KNOW MOST EVERYONE HERE...?

AH... AND HERE'S MY HUSBAND. REED, THESE ARE THE FIELDSTONES, HYRAM AND LOIS...

AH, YES. FROM THE SECOND HOUSE ON THE NEXT BLOCK? PLEASED TO MEET YOU.

LIKEWISE. THIS IS A FINE HOUSE YOU'VE GOT HERE. WE CONSIDERED BUYING IT OURSELVES, ONCE.

HOME SWEET HOME

THANK YOU. WE LIKE IT. AND, MORE IMPORTANTLY, SO DOES OUR YOUNG SON.

LITTLE FRANKLIN? HE'S BEEN QUITE THE *PAL* TO OUR TWINS.

SAY, IF YOU DON'T MIND ME ASKING, DOESN'T IT GET TO BE A BOTHER SOMETIMES, THE THREE OF YOU HAVING THE SAME FIRST NAMES...

...AS REED, SUE, AND FRANKLIN *RICHARDS*...

...OF THE *FANTASTIC FOUR*?

I CAN'T MAKE OUT WHAT THEY'RE SAYING...

BUT IT'S SOMETHING *NORMAL*, I'LL BET. SOMETHING ABSOLUTELY *NORMAL*.

THAT'S HOW THEY WORK, ISN'T IT? WITCHES AND DEMONS.

THEY TRICK YOU INTO THINKING THEY'RE JUST NORMAL, BORING PEOPLE.

AND THAT'S WHEN THEY *STRIKE!*

YOU SEEM WELL VERSED ON THE SUBJECT, MRS. CHALMERS.

OH, I AM. MY LATE HUSBAND, MARTIN, HE NEVER PUT MUCH STOCK IN MY READING.

IF ONLY HE WERE ALIVE TODAY. TO SEE THIS!!

YOU SHOULD BE GRATEFUL, PERHAPS, THAT HE IS *NOT*, MRS. CHALMERS. WHAT LIES AHEAD WILL BE A BLACK HOUR FOR THE GOOD PEOPLE OF THIS COMMUNITY...

I WOULD NOT WISH TO SEE ANY LOVED ONE OF MINE CONFRONTED WITH SUCH HORRORS.

THAT IS WHY *I* HAVE HELD MYSELF ALONE AND APART FROM MY FELLOW HUMANS, THROUGH ALL THE LONG YEARS SINCE I BEGAN MY *CRUSADE*.

BUT...YOU *ARE* GOING TO *STOP* THEM, AREN'T YOU? YOU'RE GOING TO *DESTROY* THEM!

ALL IN GOOD TIME, MRS. CHALMERS. WE FIRST MUST DETERMINE IF THIS "HOUSE-WARMING PARTY" IS IN FACT A *RUSE* TO LURE INNOCENTS ONTO THE *BLACK PATHWAYS*.

IF IT IS *NOT*, THEN WE MUST WAIT UNTIL THE MONSTERS ARE AGAIN *ALONE* IN THEIR LAIR.

"THE FORCES TO BE UNLEASHED THIS NIGHT MUST SPILL NO *INNOCENT* BLOOD, OR WE RUN THE RISK OF LOOSING EVILS FAR GREATER THAN THOSE YOU HAVE DESCRIBED.

"SO FOR NOW, WE CAN ONLY BIDE OUR TIME AND *WAIT*..."

ONE A.M.

THAT'S THE LAST OF THEM.

WELL, THAT WAS A PLEASANT ENOUGH EVENING. I THINK I PICKED THE RIGHT TOWN TO ESTABLISH OUR "SECRET IDENTITIES" IN.

YES, THEY DO SEEM A GOOD GROUP. FRIENDLY, INTELLIGENT.

ALTHOUGH HYRAM FIELDSTONE'S REMARK ABOUT THE FANTASTIC FOUR *DID* COME A BIT EARLY IN THE EVENING...

YES, I NOTICED YOU HAD AN EAR COCKED FOR EVERYTHING HE SAID THROUGHOUT THE REST OF THE PARTY.

JUST TO BE CERTAIN HE DIDN'T BROACH THE SUBJECT TO SOMEONE WHO MIGHT BE QUICKER TO PUT TWO AND TWO TOGETHER THAN HE.

AFTER ALL, WE KEPT OUR OWN FIRST NAMES, AND OUR SON'S MIDDLE NAME TO MAKE THIS "SECRET IDENTITY" BUSINESS LESS CONFUSING FOR FRANKLIN.

BUT IT DOES LEAVE US SOMEWHAT ***VULNERABLE*** TO ANYONE WHO MIGHT REALIZE THE ELASTIC POWERS OF ***MISTER FANTASTIC*** ARE HIGHLY... ADAPTABLE.

THAT'S BETTER! THAT'S THE LONGEST I'VE HAD TO HOLD "REED BENJAMIN'S" FACE.

JUST THEN...

MOMMY, I NEED A GLASSA WATER.

YOU GO AHEAD, HONEY. I'LL TIDY UP DOWN HERE.

AND SO...

THERE NOW, EVERYTHING ALL RIGHT, KIDDO?

I GUESS SO, MOMMY.

I HAD A FUNNY DREAM, ALL ABOUT A SKINNY LADY WHO WAS TRYING TO HURT YOU AN' DADDY. AND AT THE END OUR WHOLE HOUSE GOT SWALLOWED UP BY A BIG RED MAN WITH HORNS.

BUT...WELL, IT'S ALL OVER NOW, SO I GUESS I'M OKAY.

THAT'S GOOD. DREAMS ARE NOTHING TO BE AFRAID OF, JUST LIKE DADDY'S TOLD YOU.

G'NIGHT, SPORT.

NI'NIGHT, MOMMY. SAY NI'NIGHT TO DADDY FOR ME...

YOUNG FRANKLIN RICHARDS IS DOZING EVEN BEFORE THE LIGHT IS OUT.

BUT SUSAN STORM RICHARDS' MIND IS ANYTHING BUT RESTFUL...

I HAVE THE STRANGEST FEELING SOMETHING IS ***HAPPENING*** WITH FRANKLIN. HE SEEMED A LITTLE ODD THE OTHER DAY WHEN I FOUND HIM IN ONE OF REED'S LABS IN THE BAXTER BUILDING...*

SINCE THEN HE'S BEEN JUST FINE AGAIN, BUT I CAN'T HELP WORRYING. THERE ARE GREAT AND TERRIBLE ***MUTANT POWERS*** LOCKED UP IN THAT LITTLE BOY'S SKULL. POWERS THAT ONCE THREATENED TO LAY WASTE TO THE WHOLE ***WORLD!***

IF ANYTHING HAS HAPPENED TO BREAK DOWN THE PSYCHIC DAMPERS, IT COULD MEAN ***DISASTER!***

*SEE *AMAZING SPIDER-MAN* 260

MEAN-WHILE...

THIS CERTAINLY IS PROVING TO BE AN INTER-ESTING EX-PERIENCE.

AS THE FANTASTIC FOUR WE'VE NEVER REAL-LY FELT THE NEED TO HIDE OUR IDENTITIES.

JOHNNY EX-PERIMENTED BRIEFLY--AND UNSUCCESS-FULLY-- WITH A SECRET IDENTITY WHEN HE AND SUE WERE STILL LIVING ON LONG ISLAND.

I CERTAINLY HOPE WE HAVE GREATER SUCCESS THAN HE. THE WHOLE POINT OF THIS IS, AFTER ALL, TO GIVE FRANKLIN SOME-THING LIKE A NORMAL LIFE, NOW THAT HIS POWERS ARE NO LONGER FUNCTIONAL.

IT WAS PROBABLY A SELFISH INDUL-GENCE FOR SUE AND I TO HAVE A CHILD AT ALL, GIVEN THE END-LESS DANGERS WE ARE EX-POSED TO.

THE RECENT LOSS OF OUR UNBORN SEC-OND CHILD HAS SERVED TO UNDERLINE THAT.

SO LONG AS WE ARE THE FANTASTIC FOUR, ANY TRULY NORMAL LIFE, FOR ANY OF US, IS JUST A...

...FANTASY...

GREAT SCOTT!

JUST THEN...

TONIGHT WAS FUN.

I'M GLAD OUR NEW NEIGHBORS HAVE ACCEPTED US SO COMPLETELY. I WAS WORRIED...

WHAT IN...?

REED!

REED! WHAT IS IT? WHAT'S HAPPENING?

REED?!?

OH, WHY DOESN'T HE ANSWER?

REED!!

SUE!

KEEP BACK, DARLING.

SO FAR THIS MANIFESTATION IS ONLY PURE, WHITE LIGHT...

...BUT IT COULD BECOME SOMETHING ELSE WITHOUT WARNING!

BUT... WHAT IS IT? WHAT'S ***CAUSING*** THE LIGHT?

I DON'T KNOW. IT SEEMS TO BE ***OMNI-DIRECTION-AL***, COMING AT US EQUALLY FROM ALL DIRECTIONS.

NONE OF OUR OLD FOES--OR FRIENDS FOR THAT MATTER--HAVE EVER DEM-ONSTRATED SUCH A POWER.

NOT EVEN THE ***DAZZLER*** HAS SUCH ABSOLUTE CONTROL OF LIGHT.

IS IT POSSIBLE THIS COULD BE JUST SOME KIND OF BEACON, A SIGNAL...

SOMETHING NON-HOSTILE?

BUT, BEFORE REED RICHARDS CAN EVEN FRAME A REPLY...

DEMONS!

DEMONS OR WITCHES, WHATEVER YOU BE...

THE TIME OF RECKON-ING IS AT HAND!

THY ***HOUR*** HAS ***STRUCK!***

I AM ***ELSPETH CROM-WELL.***

I AM THY ***DESTRUCTION.***

CROMWELL? I'VE HEARD THAT NAME. SHE'S A WORLD RENOWNED EXORCIST.

WHY ON EARTH IS SHE THREATENING US?

MISS CROMWELL, THERE MUST BE SOME MISTAKE...

NO MISTAKE, WARLOCK. YOU'LL NOT FOUL THIS TOWN WITH YOUR WITCHERIES.

YOUR DESPICABLE PLOT HAS BEEN UNCOVERED!

PLOT? THERE IS NO PLOT.

LISTEN TO ME. I'M NOT A WARLOCK. I'M REED RICHARDS OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR. WE...

LIAR!

ARRGH!

REED!

I'M... ALL RIGHT... SUE. JUST... STUNNED.

SOME KIND OF BIO-ELECTRIC FEEDBACK... BUT I'VE NEVER ENCOUNTERED ANYTHING LIKE IT BEFORE...

JUST LIE STILL, DARLING. DON'T *EXERT* YOURSELF UNTIL YOU'RE RECOVERED.

ONE OF MY *INVISIBLE FORCE FIELDS* SHOULD HOLD THIS... LADY.

SOMETHING FORMING IN THE AIR ABOVE ME... SOMETHING *UNSEEN*...?

YES. A BARRIER OF SOME KIND, AN INVISIBLE WALL.

YOU MIMIC THE POWERS OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR QUITE WELL, WITCHES.

BUT NOT QUITE WELL ENOUGH!

SHE *PENETRATED* MY FIELD!

HOW...

GOOD GRIEF!

OH! REED!

SUSAN!

SUE!

BUT BEFORE EVEN REED CAN REACH HIS WIFE...

ARRGGHH!

SNAP

MY...ARM...!

SOMETHING... SOMETHING DOWN THERE... BROKE IT! SNAPPED IT... LIKE A *TWIG!*

BUT... THAT'S... IMPOS-SIBLE!

NOTHING IS IMPOS-SIBLE, WARLOCK. NOT WHEN YOUR OWN DARK FORCES CAN BE HARNESSED AND TURNED AGAINST YOU.

I HAVE TRAVELED ALL THE WORLD, SEEN ALL THE BLACKNESS WHICH CAN CORRUPT THE HUMAN SOUL.

AND I HAVE LEARNED TO SHAPE THE DARKNESS, AND FROM IT BRING FORTH *LIGHT!*

THE SELF-SAME LIGHT WHICH WILL NOW *DESTROY...*

...WHAT?!?

NO!!!

YOU! YOU SURVIVED THE CREATURES OF THE *PIT?*

ONLY BARELY...BUT YES. YES, I SURVIVED. THAT'S WHAT WE DO *BEST* IN THE FAN-TASTIC FOUR.

WE *SURVIVE,* WHICH IS MORE THAN YOU'RE GOING TO DO...

THE *LIE* AGAIN?

THEN LET THE *FINAL PUNISH-MENT* BE UN-LEASHED!

REED... WHAT IS SHE DOING..?

I... I CAN'T EVEN GUESS, SUE. I'M A SCIENTIST. WHAT'S HAPPENING HERE...

...HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH SCIENCE!

I SUMMON ANCIENT FORCES, WITCHES.

YOUR OWN DARK KIND WILL STAND IN FINAL JUDGMENT.

THE KNIGHTS OF HADES!

MY FORCE FIELD ISN'T STOPPING THEM!

REED!

MEAN-WHILE...

MOMMY...?

DADDY..?

FEAR CLUTCHING AT HIS SMALL HEART, FRANKLIN HURRIES DOWN THROUGH THE DARK HOUSE...

Flour

Sugar

MOMMY!

DADDY!

AND HEADLONG INTO DISASTER!

OW!

MOMMMMM MMM MEEEEEEEEEEE

OUT-SIDE...

THIS IS MADNESS! WE CAN'T FIGHT THESE THINGS, AND WE CAN'T GO ON DODGING FOREVER!

CROMWELL! STOP THIS IN-SANITY! DON'T YOU SEE WHAT YOU'VE SET LOOSE?

THESE MONSTROSITIES AREN'T IN YOUR CONTROL! AFTER THEY DESTROY US, THEY'LL MARCH ON TO DESTROY EVERYTHING IN THEIR PATH.

EVERYTHING!

YOUR LIES WILL NOT SWAY ME, WITCH! IN TWENTY YEARS I HAVE LEARNED ALL THE BLACK WAYS OF YOUR ARTS.

I KNOW ONLY FIRE CAN STOP FIRE.

ONLY BLACK MAG-IC CAN STOP BLACK MAGIC.

IT IS NOT ME WHO THREATENS THE WORLD HERE! *NOT ME!*

ISN'T IT? ISN'T IT? LOOK AROUND YOU, CROMWELL.

LOOK WHAT "YOUR" SOLDIERS ARE DOING!

CAN'T YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU'VE DONE? IF THESE CREATURES ARE TRULY KNIGHTS OF HADES, THEN THEY ARE *CURSED THINGS!*

THEY HAVE BEEN SEN-TENCED TO ETERNAL PUNISHMENT FOR CRIMES IMPOSSIBLE TO IMAGINE--ACTS OF UNSPEAKABLE EVIL!

AND IT'S YOU WHO HAS UNLEASHED THEM, NOT US. *YOU, ELSPETH CROMWELL!*

DON'T YOU SEE? YOU'VE FALLEN FROM YOUR OWN CRUSADE! YOU'VE LET THE FORCES OF EVIL TWIST YOU, TURN YOU TO THEIR OWN ENDS.

WHO KNOWS HOW LONG THEY'VE WAITED, WAIT-ED FOR YOU TO UNLEASH THEM AGAINST AN *IN-NOCENT TARGET--*

--SO THEY COULD AT LAST BE FREE!

...N-NO...

NO! NO! YOU LIE! YOU LIE AND I CAN PROVE IT!

I STILL COMMAND THE KNIGHTS. IT WAS MY WILL THAT RAISED THEM...

I CAN OR-DER THEM BACK!

I CAN UNGH!

FOOL!

AND, AT THAT MOMENT...

MOMMY! DADDY! INSIDE THE HOUSE...

FRANKLIN!

YOU'RE HURT! YOU'RE BLEEDING!

HURT? HURT?!? NO! NO! NO--IF YOU'RE RIGHT--!

THE BLOOD OF AN INNOCENT--!

NO! NO! IT CANNOT BE! IT CANNOT BE!

WHY NOT, ELSPETH CROMWELL?

DID YOU NOT SAY YOU WOULD SUMMON ME FORTH?

I AM THE FINAL PUNISH-MENT...

THE FINAL DOOM!

MEPHISTO!

MEANWHILE...

IN THE HEART OF MANHATTAN'S GREENWICH VILLAGE, THERE IS A HOUSE.

AND IN ONE OF THE COUNTLESS ROOMS OF THAT OLD DOMICILE, THERE IS A MAN.

AND, THROUGH THE EVER VIGILANT MIND OF THAT MAN, A SUDDEN DAGGER OF INDESCRIBABLE PAIN!

ARRGH!

MASTER, ARE YOU ALL RIGHT? I HEARD YOU CRY OUT...?

I AM... UNDAMAGED, WONG. BUT FAR FROM ALL RIGHT.

SOMETHING HAS BREACHED THE INTERDIMENSIONAL BARRIER BETWEEN OUR REALITY PLANE AND THAT OF HADES.

AND SOMETHING HAS USED THAT BREACH TO ESCAPE INTO OUR WORLD--SOMETHING EVIL, AN EVIL SO GREAT I AM LOATHE TO EVEN CONSIDER WHAT IT MIGHT BE...

YET I MUST FACE IT, AND TRACK IT TO ITS EVIL SOURCE, THERE TO IMPRISON IT ONCE MORE, OR DESTROY IT FOREVER.

FOR SUCH IS THE TASK OF *DOCTOR STRANGE*...

GENTLY THE CLOAK OF LEVITATION CARRIES THE MASTER OF THE MYSTIC ARTS NORTHWARDS, AND THE CHILL THAT SUDDENLY GRIPS HIM HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH THE APPROACHING WINTER....

NEXT ISSUE: DR. STRANGE! MEPHISTO! DIRE WRAITHS! THE RETURN OF THE THING! THE MYSTERY OF FRANKLIN RICHARDS!

BACK FROM BEYOND!

IN 30 DAYS! BE HERE!

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TM

THE SHEEP MEADOW, CENTRAL PARK, NEW YORK, NEW YORK.

THE EVE OF **DOOMSDAY!**

TOO EARLY YET FOR EVEN THE STREET PEOPLE TO BE ABROAD IN THE PARK.

TOO EARLY FOR ANYONE TO WITNESS A MOST AMAZING **HOMECOMING...**

BACK FROM BEYOND

ONE HUNDRED MILES NORTH OF NEW YORK CITY.

HIS NAME IS STEPHEN STRANGE, BUT TO A FEW, FORTUNATE, MORTALS HE IS KNOWN AS **DOCTOR STRANGE,** MASTER OF THE MYSTIC ARTS.

SORCERER SUPREME!

AND THIS NIGHT HE IS ON A **MISSION!**

THE **VIBRATIONS** IN THE ETHER GROW STRONGER. THE **FONT OF EVIL** IS DIRECTLY AHEAD OF ME...

I'M BACK!

SEEMS ALMOST HARD TA BELIEVE, DON'T IT? HALF A HEARTBEAT AGO I WUZ OFF ON SOME WACK-O ALIEN PLANET ON TH' OTHER SIDE OF TH' UNIVERSE...*

...NOW JUST TH' PUSH OF A BUTTON AN' I'M BREATHIN' NEW YORK AIR AGAIN.

I OUGHTA FEEL **GLAD**, BUT I **DON'T**.

*SEE THE THING #22.

MAY THE ***VISHANTI*** GRANT THAT I AM ABLE TO DISPEL THE ***EVIL*** THAT HAS LOOSED ITSELF UPON THE EARTH THIS NIGHT.

THE MANIFESTATION WAS SO POWERFUL--ENOUGH TO STRIKE AT MY VERY SOUL AS A PHYSICAL AGONY-- THAT I FEAR I SHALL NEED ALL MY SKILLS TO STOP IT.

THERE! THAT SCENE OF DESTRUCTION LIES AT THE VERY ***HEART*** OF THE EVIL.

EVEN TO LOOK UPON IT DRIVES A DAGGER THROUGH MY HEART.

SO MUCH STUFF HAPPENED WHILE I WUZ OFF ON TH' PLANET OF THE "SECRET WARS."* I GOT MY HEAD TURNED INSIDE-OUT A COUPLA TIMES.

I STAYED TO DO A LOTTA THINKIN'-- AND BEING ABLE TA CHANGE BACK AN' FORTH FROM TH' ***THING*** TA ***BEN GRIMM*** ANY TIME I WANTED WAS AN ADDED PLUS.

*FOR FIRST-TIME READERS--AND THOSE OF YOU RETURNING FROM DEEP SPACE-- THE THING SPENT THE LAST SEVERAL MONTHS ON THE DISTANT WORLD TO WHICH MANY OF EARTH'S SUPER BEINGS HAD BEEN TRANSPORTED BY THE ***BEYONDER*** IN THE ***MARVEL SUPER HEROES SECRET WARS*** LIMITED SERIES.

REED ***TOLD*** ME I COULD ONLY DO THAT 'CAUSE O' SOMETHIN' IN TH' PLANET'S MAKE-UP. BUT NOW I KNOW THAT AIN'T REALLY THE WAY IT WORKED. EVEN THERE I GOT ***STUCK*** AS THE THING AGAIN.

FUNNY... I STAYED ON THAT PLANET TA SEE IF I COULD MAYBE GET STUFF STRAIGHTENED OUT IN MY MIND. BUT EVERYTHING IS AS SCREWED UP AS IT WUZ BEFORE.

GUESS I CAN ONLY GET BACK ON SOMETHIN' LIKE AN EVEN KEEL IF I START RIGHT IN SORTING OUT WHAT I'VE LEARNED ABOUT MYSELF...

AN' THE BEST WAY TA DO THAT IS BY STARTIN' WITH ***ALICIA***...

NOW, LET MY ***CLOAK OF LEVITATION*** LOWER ME GENTLY TO THE GROUND, A DISCRETE DISTANCE FROM THE CROWD OF ONLOOKERS...

...AND LET US SEE WHAT I CAN LEARN OF THIS AFFAIR FROM THE LOCAL CONSTABULARY.

EXCUSE ME, OFFICER. I AM A DOCTOR. CAN YOU TELL ME WHAT HAS HAPPENED HERE?

HOLME

HUH? THAT'S FUNNY-- FOR A SECOND THERE I COULDA SWORN I SAW...

WHO DID YOU SAY YOU ARE, SIR?

DOCTOR STEPHEN STRANGE. IS THERE ANYONE ***HURT***? MAY I BE OF ASSISTANCE?

HOLME

THUS, THE PENSIVE THING CROSSES A FEW BLOCKS WEST OF THE PARK, AND, AFTER A SHORT STROLL DOWN BROADWAY...

SEÑOR GRIMM! IT HAS BEEN A LONG TIME SINCE WE LAST SAW JOU!

MORNIN', JORGÉ. STILL THE HARDEST WORKIN' APARTMENT MANAGER IN SOHO?

MARKET

I TRY, SEÑOR. WOULD JOU LIKE ME TO BUZZ THE SEÑORITA *MASTERS* AND TELL HER JOU'RE...

NO. S'OKAY. I'D RATHER THIS WUZ A *SURPRISE.*

AND SO...

SOME SURPRISE! ME AN' ALICIA'S BIN TIGHTER'N TIGHT FOR A WHOLE BUNCHA YEARS NOW. WE EVEN TALKED ABOUT *MARRIAGE* ONCE OR TWICE-- RIDICULOUS AS THAT'D BE FOR *US.*

NOW...

NOW, HOW CAN I TELL HER I'VE COME TO A DECISION ABOUT US? HOW CAN I TELL HER I'LL ALWAYS *LOVE* HER, BUT FROM NOW ON WE CAN'T BE NOTHIN' BUT...FRIENDS.

AFTER ALL TH' MONTHS SHE'S BIN WAITIN' FER ME WHILE I WUZ OFF PLAYIN' SPACE RANGER, THAT BIT A' NEWS IS GONNA BUST HER UP PRETTY BAD.

BUT IT'S BETTER THAN GOIN' ON LIVIN' A *LIE...*

ALICIA M

KNOK KNOK

I'M AFRAID THESE FOLKS ARE BEYOND MEDICAL HELP, DOCTOR. TRAGIC, ISN'T IT? FOUR PEOPLE-- ONE OF 'EM JUST A LITTLE BOY-- SNUFFED OUT LIKE... LIKE... I DON'T KNOW WHAT.

POLI

AND THE NEIGHBORS SAY THEY'D JUST THIS EVENING HAD THEIR *HOUSE-WARMING PARTY.*

THEIR NAME WAS *BENJAMIN.*

BY THE *HOARY HOSTS OF HOGGOTH!* IT IS *REED* AND *SUSAN RICHARDS* OF THE *FANTASTIC FOUR!!!*

BOY, THIS BETTER BE *REAL* IMPORTANT AT THIS HOUR OF THE...

uh oh

WHAT TH...?!?

SLAM

HE'S BACK!

I... I KNEW HE WAS BOUND TO COME BACK SOONER OR LATER, BUT I DIDN'T EXPECT... I MEAN...

OH BROTHER! I GOTTA *TELL* HIM. BUT... *HOW?*

DON'T WASTE YOUR TEARS ON THEM, SERGEANT HULME. THEY MET THE FATE THEY *DESERVED!* ALTHOUGH IT COST THE LIFE OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST *EXORCIST* AS WELL!

WHAT? *ALMA CHALMERS!* ARE *YOU* MIXED UP IN THIS AWFUL BUSINESS?

WAIT! WHAT WAS THAT YOU SAID ABOUT AN *EXORCIST?*

NOT JUST *AN* EXORCIST. *ELSPETH CROMWELL!* THE GREATEST FIGHTER AGAINST MYSTIC EVIL THE WORLD HAS EVER KNOWN!

CROMWELL? YES. YES, I HAVE *HEARD* OF HER. BUT ... HOW DID SHE COME HERE? WHAT HAS SHE TO DO WITH THIS AFFAIR?

SHE CAME BECAUSE *I* WROTE HER--TOLD HER ABOUT THE *WITCHES* WHO HAD MOVED INTO OUR NEIGHBORHOOD.

OH, THEY WERE CLEVER, PLAYING AT BEING NICE, NORMAL HUMANS! BUT I SAW THROUGH THEIR DISGUISE!

AND ELSPETH CROMWELL CAME--CAME TO *BELLE PORTE* AND BANISHED THEM TO ETERNAL PUNISHMENT!

SMASH

KRAK

OMI-GOSH!

BEN!! DON'T!!

BEN! PLEASE! I CAN EXPLAIN! IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK! I MEAN... IT *IS* WHAT YOU THINK, BUT NOT THE **WAY** YOU THINK...

I MEAN...

I KNOW WHAT YA MEAN, YA TWO-BIT ROMEO! ANYTHING IN A *SKIRT* IS FAIR GAME FER YOU, *RIGHT?*

AND, AT THAT MOMENT...

IN A PLACE WITH NO TRUE NAME, IN A DIMENSION BEYOND OUR UNDERSTANDING, A WOMAN SCREAMS...

...AS SHE HAS SCREAMED NOW FOR WHAT SEEMS LIKE **CENTURIES.**

ENOUGH!

A MOMENT'S RESPITE, AT LEAST, EVEN SUCH *EXQUISITE* AGONY MAY BECOME *ENDURABLE*, IF ONE IS ALLOWED TO BECOME *ACCUSTOMED* TO IT!

MONSTER!

EVEN IF SHE *BELONGS* TA SOMEBODY ELSE!!

"BELONGS?" WHY, YOU OVERBLOWN BAG OF MUSCLE...!!

FLAME ON!

HA!

YOU'RE JUST TOO STUPID TO SEE IT AREN'T YOU, THING? SOMETHING SPECIAL HAPPENED WHILE YOU WERE AWAY.

SOMETHING I'VE BEEN SEARCHING FOR *ALL MY LIFE!*

YOU WOULD SPEAK THUS TO *MEPHISTO?*

YOU WOUND ME TO THE *QUICK,* HUMAN. MEPHISTO IS NO MERE MONSTER. MEPHISTO IS *MONARCH OF MONSTERS...*

SO YOU CLAIM. BUT ALL I SEE IS ANOTHER PETTY SUPER-BEING WHO USES HIS GREAT POWERS TO *TORTURE* AND *KILL.*

THE LIVING *LORD OF EVIL!*

POOR, PATHETIC MORTAL, YOU STRIVE TO COMPREHEND MEPHISTO, AND IN SO DOING, YOU SEEK TO REDUCE HIM TO YOUR LEVEL.

BUT MEPHISTO IS NOT TO BE THUS REDUCED, *REED RICHARDS.* MEPHISTO IS OLDER THAN *HUMANITY*-- OLDER THAN *TIME ITSELF!*

MEPHISTO IS EVIL!

MORE *BOASTING,* MEPHISTO. MORE EMPTY WORDS. IF YOU HADN'T DISCOVERED SOME WAY TO NEUTRALIZE OUR POWERS, *SUSAN* AND *I* WOULD VERY QUICKLY CHANGE YOUR TUNE FOR YOU.

HEY!

DON'T WASTE YER TRICKS ON ME, TORCHIE!

YER FLAME AIN'T HOT ENOUGH TA *BURN* ME OR THIS WHOLE JOINT'D BE IN FLAMES BY NOW.

YOU'VE HAD THIS COMIN' FER A LONG TIME, PUNK. ALWAYS COMIN' ON SO SMUG, JUST 'CAUSE YOU GOT DEALT A SWEET HAND BY THEM *COSMIC RAYS* WE WUZ EXPOSED TO...

... 'STEADA BEIN' TURNED INTA A *MONSTER!*

BEN! WAIT! I...

UNGH!

STOP!

NEUTRALIZED? YOUR PUNY POWERS ARE NOT NEUTRALIZED, MORTAL.

BUT YOU ARE NOW IN THE REALM OF MEPHISTO.

AND NOTHING AND NO ONE FUNCTIONS HERE BUT THAT *I* WILL IT!

AHGH!

UNDERSTAND THAT SINGLE, SEARING *FACT,* HUMAN.

ONCE YOU WERE ONE OF YOUR WORLD'S GREATEST SUPER HEROES.

NOW YOU ARE BUT A *TOY!*

THE PLAY-THING OF *MEPHISTO!*

ALICIA! BABY!!

DON'T YOU "ALICIA-BABY" ME, BEN GRIMM, YOU... YOU...

...OAF!

THROUGH HIS NEARLY IMPERVIOUS HIDE THE THING DOES NOT EVEN FEEL THE SLAP. IT IS THE MERE ACT THAT BRINGS SUDDEN TEARS TO HIS EYES.

BUT... BUT, ALICIA... I THOUGHT...

I KNOW WHAT YOU THOUGHT. AND YOU'RE *RIGHT!* JOHNNY AND I ARE IN LOVE!

BUT IT'S NOT THE CHEAP, TAWDRY AFFAIR YOU WANT TO MAKE IT! WE GREW TOGETHER... NATURALLY... SLOWLY, OVER THE MONTHS YOU WERE AWAY.

STOP, OH, PLEASE STOP!

DON'T HURT HIM ANY MORE! I *BEG* YOU!

BUT OF COURSE.

IN ANY CASE, IT IS TIME I RETURNED MY ATTENTION TO *YOU.* THERE ARE SO MANY AVENUES OF AGONY WE HAVE YET TO EXPLORE.

LET US *WASTE* NO MORE PRECIOUS MOMENTS...

MEPHISTO! NO! CAN'T YOU SEE SHE'S HAD ENOUGH? SHE CAN'T TAKE ANY MORE!

YOU'LL *KILL* HER!

OH... NEVER FEAR, MY LITTLE FRIENDS. THERE IS NO DANGER OF THAT.

NEITHER OF YOU CAN DIE NOW...

SHE'S TELLING YOU THE TRUTH, BEN. ALICIA ISN'T JUST ANOTHER CONQUEST FOR ME. IT'S *REAL* THIS TIME.

SAVE TH' SPEECHES FER DAYTIME DRAMA, KID. I GET TH' PICTURE.

WE...WE *LOVE* EACH OTHER.

I GOT IT TH' MINUTE TH' DOOR OPENED AN' I SAW JOHNNY.

BUT...BUT HOW CAN I EVER ADMIT THAT WHAT REALLY SET ME OFF WUZ MY WOUNDED MALE *EGO.*

I KNEW BEFORE I EVEN GOT BACK TA EARTH THAT IT WUZ ALL OVER 'TWEEN ME AN' ALICIA...

BUT...BUT I WANTED TA BE TH' ONE TA TELL *HER!*

I...

HEY! WHAT GIVES WITH TH' *SUN?!?*

THE VERY FACT THAT YOU ARE HERE IN MY ETERNAL REALM...

...PROVES CONCLUSIVELY...

...THAT YOU ARE *ALREADY DEAD!!!*

NOOOO!

THE SUN.

FOR FOUR THOUSAND MILLION YEARS IT HAS SHED THE WARMTH OF ITS FIRES, THE GLOW OF ITS LIFE, OVER THE EARTH.

AND IN ALL THOSE YEARS IT HAS SEEMED, TO THE FLEETING LIVES OF THOSE WHO DWELL ON THAT TINY PLANET, TIMELESS AND UNCHANGING, PERFECT AND ABSOLUTE.

UNTIL TODAY...

YOU SEE? YOU SEE? THE SWEET RELEASE OF *DEATH* CANNOT SAVE YOU HERE.

YOUR AGONIES SHALL BE ENDLESS AND INESCAPABLE!!

MEPHISTO *RULES!*

MEPHISTO IS THE LIVING FORCE OF *EVIL*, THE BLACK HEART THAT PUMPS ITS PUTRID *BILE* INTO THE FARTHEST CORNERS OF THE *UNIVERSE!*

AND...YES! *YES!!* MEPHISTO GROWS *STRONGER*, EVER STRONGER!

AS EVIL GROWS UPON THE FACE OF THE EARTH, SO IS MEPHISTO *ENRICHED!*

SO IS HE MADE *INVINCIBLE!!*

I THINK NOT, LORD OF HADES.

IT'S... ANOTHER *PLANET!* AN ALIEN WORLD, FLYIN' OUT OF THAT... BLACK HOLE!

BUT... BUT WHAT KIND OF WORLD CAN IT BE? THE DARKNESS--EVEN THOUGH I AM *BLIND* I CAN *FEEL* THE DARKNESS!!

YEAH! LIKE A BILLION LI'L BLACK SPIDERS CRAWLIN' ALL OVER YA!

WAIT! DID YOU FEEL SOMETHING? A TREMOR IN THE FLOOR?

YES... BUT WHAT...?

IT'S THAT PLANET! IT'S MOVIN' STRAIGHT TOWARDS *EARTH,* AND TH' GRAVITY IS...

ALICIA!

OH!

LOOK OUT!

WHO DARES...?!?

COME NOW, MY OLD FOE. WE HAVE MET IN BATTLE SO *MANY* TIMES. SURELY YOU RECOGNIZE ME?

DOCTOR STRANGE!

YES, I KNOW YOU, SORCERER! AND I CAN *DESTROY* YOU!

BY AVANAHM'S NINE CIRCLES! HE *IS* MORE POWERFUL THAN EVER!

HOLD ON, BABE! I'VE GOT YOU!

JOHNNY! WHAT IS IT? WHAT'S HAPPENING?

IT'S *HORRIBLE!* THE WHOLE CITY LOOKS TO BE IN RUINS!

IT'S LIKE A RE-RUN OF THAT TIME *EGO* THE *LIVING PLANET* ATTACKED!*

YEAH--ONLY I GOT ME A NASTY FEELIN' THERE AIN'T NO GOOD FAIRY GONNA MAKE IT ALL BETTER THIS TIME!

*BACK IN FANTASTIC FOUR #234.

MEPHISTO HAS ALWAYS BEEN A POTENT ADVERSARY, EMBODYING IN HIS MANY FORMS THE VERY *SOUL* OF HUMAN EVIL...

BUT SOMETHING...SOME HERETOFORE UNKNOWN FORCE IS FLOWING THROUGH HIM NOW, BOOSTING HIS EVIL POWER A THOUSANDFOLD!

YET I MUST FIND A WAY TO... *EH?*

THAT CRYSTAL, SOMETHING IS CONCEALED WITHIN IT...

A SIMPLE SPELL OF *REVELATION* SHOULD SHOW...

?!?!

IT IS THE RICHARDS' CHILD--*FRANKLIN.* BUT WHY IS HE THUS ENCASED?

TO TORTURE AN INNOCENT CHILD WOULD SURELY GIVE MEPHISTO BOUNDLESS *PLEASURE...*

...YET THE CHILD *SLEEPS,* PEACEFUL AND UNHARMED, DISTURBED NOT EVEN BY *DREAMS!*

C'MON, ALICIA. I'M GONNA GET YOU BACK TO **FF HQ.** WITH THE RE-INFORCED STRUCTURING **REED** BUILT INTO HER, THE **BAXTER BUILDING** SHOULD HAVE RIDDEN OUT THE GRAVITY FLUX WITH NO PROBLEM.

HMM. LOOKS AS IF THE DAMAGE ISN'T AS BAD AS WE FIRST THOUGHT. NEW YORK'S BUILT ON SOLID **BEDROCK** SO THERE ISN'T ANY OF THE GROUND SUBSIDANCE THAT'S THE MAJOR CAUSE OF DAMAGE IN 'QUAKES.

MOST OF THE DAMAGE SEEMS TO BE FROM THE FACADES FALLING OFF SOME OF THE OLDER BUILDINGS.

THAT, AND ABOUT A MILLION BROKEN WINDOWS. ONCE I DROP YOU OFF, I'LL FLY OVER THE CITY AND DO WHAT I CAN TO CONTROL THE FIRES.

GET AWAY FROM HIM!

WHAT IN...? MEPHISTO SCREAMS AS ONE DRIVEN **MAD!** WHY DOES **HE** STRIVE TO **PROTECT** THE BOY?

*BUT, ACROSS THE CAVERN OF HORROR, THE COLOSSAL INTELLECT OF THE MAN CALLED **MISTER FANTASTIC** INSTANTLY ASSESSES THE BIZARRE SITUATION--AND COMES TO AN EQUALLY BIZARRE **CONCLUSION...***

MEPHISTO IS **AFRAID OF FRANKLIN!**

BUT...BUT **WHY?** FRANKLIN HAS VAST, INCREDIBLY DESTRUCTIVE **MUTANT POWERS...**

...BUT THEY HAVE BEEN UNDER CONTROL, LOCKED WITHIN FRANKLIN'S MIND FOR MONTHS NOW.* SURELY THEY PRESENT NO THREAT TO MEPHISTO? UNLESS...

*SINCE FANTASTIC FOUR # 245.

WYATT! SHE-HULK! WHAT'S THE STATUS?

NOT GOOD, JOHNNY!

DAMAGE REPORTS ARE COMING IN FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD.

THAT NEW PLANET IS CAUSING TIDAL WAVES, VULCANISM-- THE WORKS!!

NOT ONLY THAT, BUT WE'VE BEEN TRYING FOR *TWENTY MINUTES* TO RAISE REED AND SUE AT THEIR PLACE UP IN CONNECTICUT, AND ALL WE GET IS DEAD AIR.

IT'S BEGINNING TO LOOK AS THOUGH THIS DISASTER MAY HAVE *CLAIMED* THEM...

DON'T COUNT THE BODIES JUST YET, WYATT. MY SISTER AND BROTHER-IN-LAW HAVE COME THROUGH WORSE THAN THIS.

LOOK AFTER ALICIA, WHILE I GO DO WHAT I CAN OUTSIDE.

BE CAREFUL, MY DARLING!

OF COURSE! MEPHISTO IS THE PRINCE OF LIARS, BUT EVEN HIS LIES MUST CONTAIN A GERM OF *TRUTH!* HE SAID WE WERE ALREADY DEAD--PALPABLE NONSENSE--BUT CLEARLY WE ARE NOT OCCUPYING OUR TRUE *PHYSICAL* BODIES.

THE FACT THAT WE ARE IN OUR *COSTUMES*--NOT THE STREET CLOTHES WE WERE IN WHEN WE "DIED"--IS PERSUASIVE ENOUGH EVIDENCE FOR THESE BEING OUR *PSI-BODIES*-- OUR "ASTRAL FORMS."

SINCE THE MENTAL BLOCKS AGAINST FRANKLIN'S POWERS ARE IN HIS *PHYSICAL* BODY, THEY WOULD NOT BE PRESENT IN THIS, HIS "SPIRIT-SELF." THUS...

STRANGE! FRANKLIN IS THE KEY! *FREE FRANKLIN!*

NO!!

I DO NOT UNDERSTAND HOW THIS CAN BE, RICHARDS...

BUT I WILL, OF COURSE, COMPLY!

"MY DARLING?" WAIT A MINUTE! AM I MISSING SOMETHING HERE, OR...?

YOU ARE NOT MISSING ANYTHING, *JENNIFER.* JOHNNY AND I HAVE HAD A SERIOUS RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPING FOR SEVERAL MONTHS.

BUT...BUT ALICIA, WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN WHEN THE THING...?

IT HAS ALREADY HAPPENED, JEN. BEN RETURNED THIS MORNING BEFORE ALL THIS BEGAN.

HE DID? THEN...THEN IT'S *OVER.* MY TIME WITH THE *FANTASTIC FOUR* IS *DONE!*

FUNNY, I'D THOUGHT IT'D JUST BE A FUN FEW MONTHS, SUBBING FOR THE THING, BUT IT'S BECOME SOMETHING *MORE* THAN THAT.

SOMETHING *SPECIAL...*

SOMETHING *IMPORTANT!*

MEANWHILE...

WHADDA MESS!

I'M BEGINNIN' TA FEEL LIKE I'M A REAL *JONAH,* BRINGIN' BAD LUCK WHEREVER I GO.

THAT "SECRET WARS" PLANET WUZ S'POSED TA BE ALL PEACEABLE AN' CALM, BUT IT TAPPED INTA MY PSYCHE AN' GOT ALL MESSED UP.

AN' NOW I HAVEN'T BIN HOME MORE'N THREE SECONDS AN' THE WHOLE *EARTH* GOES *BLOOEY!*

REED! HE LOOKS SO TINY, SO VULNERABLE! I...I'VE GOT TO GET TO HIM!

NO, SUE. *NO!* YOUR POWERS AS THE *INVISIBLE GIRL* ARE NO USE AGAINST THE KIND OF FORCES THAT ARE BEING UNLEASHED HERE.

"ONLY FRANKLIN CAN SAVE US NOW. ONLY *FRANKLIN!"*

WHERE...

...AM...

...I?

I...RE...MEMBER... BAD LADY 'TACKING MOMMY AN' DADDY... AN' ...BIG *RED MAN* BROKE OUR HOUSE...

THE CHILD IS DISORIENTED... HELPLESS...

IT SEEMS YOUR PLAN MUST *FAIL,* REED RICHARDS. WATCH, THEN, AS YOUR CHILD IS *TORN* TO *SHREDS...*

...AND DOES NOT *DIE!!*

...NO...

WAIT A MINUTE...

TIME TA STOP MOPIN', GRIMM. THAT GAL LOOKS LIKE SHE'S IN BAD SHAPE.

MISS--DON'T BE AFRAID. I JUST WANNA HELP YOU.

HELP ME? YES... YES, YOU CAN HELP ME!

I WAS CAUGHT UNPREPARED FOR THE MOMENT OF *WORLD-MERGE.*

THIS FRAIL HUMAN FORM IS BADLY DAMAGED.

IT'S TIME I *RELINQUISHED* IT IN FAVOR OF ANOTHER...

...A MORE *POWERFUL* FORM...

NO.

NO.

NO!

YOUR FORM!

HEY!

DO NOT STRUGGLE, HUMAN. IT WILL AVAIL YOU NAUGHT. YOU ARE, AT THIS MOMENT, AS ONE *DEAD!*

Y-YOU...YOU'RE ONE O' THEM CRUMMY *DIRE WRAITHS!*

MORE THAN THAT, HUMAN. FOR THIS DAY IS OUR FINAL *VICTORY* ACHIEVED. THIS DAY WE BECOME MASTERS OF THE WORLD...

SHE'S PASSED OUT!

YOUR...POWER *IS* GREAT, YOUNG ONE. PERHAPS EVEN GREATER THAN I HAD FEARED.

BUT *NEW* AND GREATER POWER FLOWS THROUGH MY LIMBS. THE WORLD IS BESET BY CALAMITOUS EVIL, AND THE FORCE OF THAT EVIL *FILLS* ME, SATURATES ME. I GROW...

...I GROW...

...WEAKER??

NO! *NO!* THE POWER DESERTS ME! THE EVIL IS...

...GONE...

AND NOW...

...*BAD MAN*...

WHAT COULD HAVE...?

WAIT!

THAT OTHER PLANET! IT'S... GONE!!

WHAT TH' HECK HAPPENED?

THE ANSWER WILL NOT BE QUICK IN COMING. THE DESTRUCTION OF THE **HOMEWORLD** OF THE CREATURES KNOWN AS **DIRE WRAITHS** WAS ACCOMPLISHED BY A SMALL BAND OF BRAVE MEN ON A SPACE-PLATFORM HIGH ABOVE THE EARTH.*

*FULL DETAILS CAN BE FOUND IN **ROM** #65.

BUT FOR THE PEOPLE OF EARTH, THE INJURED, THE DYING, THE SURVIVORS OF THIS AWFUL DAY, THERE CAN BE NO IMMEDIATE KNOWLEDGE OF THIS.

ONLY A SUDDEN SENSE OF INEXPLICABLE **JOY** THAT PIERCES THE BLACK HEART OF PAIN AND BRINGS, FOR JUST A MOMENT, A SWEET AND WELCOME **PEACE.**

...YOU'RE GONE, TOO!!!

LATER--

SO ALL THEM MIS'RABLE WRAITHS ARE *FINISHED?* THAT'S ABOUT TH' BEST NEWS I'VE HAD ALL WEEK, LOCKLIN.* WHADDABOUT MY OLD PAL *ROM?*

GONE, GRIMM. HE SAID HIS JOB WAS DONE HERE, AND HE HEADED OFF INTO SPACE, ALONE.

*GENERAL MERRIWETHER LOCKLIN, HEAD OF THE ELITE COMMANDO CORPS, THE **WRAITH-HUNTER RANGERS.**

AND SPEAKING OF PEOPLE LEAVING, I GUESS I'LL BE HAULIN' MY BIG GREEN BOD BACK OVER TO *AVENGERS MANSION* NOW YOU'RE BACK, BEN.

LATER--

I'VE NEVER EXPERIENCED ANYTHING LIKE IT! IT...IT'S SOME KIND OF *INVISIBLE BARRIER.*

IT'S BEEN HERE SINCE THAT DOCTOR FELLA EXAMINED THE BODIES.

YOU *STILL* DON'T UNDERSTAND, DO YOU? THAT DOCTOR MUST HAVE BEEN *ONE OF THEM! A WITCH!* AND HE'S CAST SOME KIND OF EVIL SPELL TO...

NOT SO, ALMA CHALMERS.

OH... OH MY SWEET...

I AM NO WITCH. I AM *DOCTOR STRANGE.* IF YOU ARE WELL-READ IN OCCULT JOURNALS, AS YOU PROFESS, NO DOUBT THAT NAME IS KNOWN TO YOU.

AND THESE PEOPLE AGAINST WHOM YOUR MEDDLING UNLEASHED FORCES OF ULTIMATE EVIL-- THESE PEOPLE ARE MEMBERS OF THE *FANTASTIC FOUR!*

OMIGOSH! THEY'RE *ALIVE!*

BECAUSE... WE WERE NEVER TRULY DEAD, CONSTABLE. MERELY IN A MYSTICAL COMA-STATE ONLY AN *ADEPT* SUCH AS DOCTOR STRANGE COULD HAVE DISTINGUISHED FROM REAL DEATH.

SHE-HULK...YOU MUSTN'T SOUND SO *SAD.* JUST BECAUSE BEN HAS RETURNED, THAT DOESN'T MEAN YOU'RE CUT OFF.

SURE, JEN. YOU'VE BEEN ONE OF US, FOUGHT AT OUR SIDE, STOOD WITH US IN TIME OF NEED.

YOU'LL ALWAYS BE WELCOME HERE. *ALWAYS!*

THANKS, JOHNNY. THANKS A LOT. YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW MUCH THAT MEANS TO ME. I REALLY...

HOLD IT, BIG GREEN. YOU'RE GETTIN' A BIT AHEAD OF YOURSELF THERE.

MOMMY! OH, MOMMY, I HAD 'NOTHER BAD DREAM! THAT BIG RED MAN WAS IN IT 'GAIN AN' HE WAS TRYIN' TO *KILL* ME! BUT I KILLED *HIM,* MOMMY!

HUSH, BABY. HUSH. IT'S ALL RIGHT. IT... IT *WAS* JUST A DREAM. JUST A TERRIBLE NIGHTMARE. BUT IT'S ALL *OVER* NOW. THE MENACE IS *ENDED.*

IS SUE RIGHT, STEPHEN? IS IT...TRULY OVER?

PERHAPS. THE MENACE OF MEPHISTO HAS CERTAINLY BEEN EXPUNGED. HIS LIFE-ESSENCE HAS BEEN BANISHED FROM THIS AND ALL ADJACENT SPIRIT-PLANES.

BUT...MEPHISTO DID NOT *CREATE* THE EVIL IN THIS WORLD. RATHER, IT WAS THE EVIL THAT *CREATED* MEPHISTO. HE WAS BUT A SHADOW, A REFLECTION OF THE BLACKNESS THAT CROUCHES IN EVERY HUMAN SOUL.

MEPHISTO *HAS* BEEN DESTROYED AT LAST. BUT SO LONG AS EVIL REMAINS IN THE HEARTS OF MEN, I FEAR IT WILL NOT BE OVERLONG BEFORE HE IS *REBORN.*

BEN...?

I ASKED YOU TO TAKE MY PLACE IN TH' *FF*, SHE-HULK, AN' AS FAR AS I'M CONCERNED, YOU STILL *GOT IT.* AN' YOU CAN KEEP IT FEREVER!

I MAY BE BACK ON EARTH...

...BUT I *AIN'T* COMING BACK T' THE *FANTASTIC FOUR!!!*

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE PAGES OF **THE THING** #23. DON'T MISS IT!

THIS ISSUE HAS BEEN A **Stan Lee** PRESENTATION, BROUGHT TO YOU BY...

John BYRNE STORY AND PENCILS

Jerry ORDWAY EMBELLISHING

Glynis WEIN COLORING

John WORKMAN LETTERING

Michael CARLIN EDITING

Jim SHOOTER EDITOR IN CHIEF

AND...WHAT OF ELSPETH CROMWELL? WHY HASN'T *SHE* BEEN RESTORED TO LIFE?

BECAUSE SHE IS *TRULY DEAD*, MY FRIEND. I KNOW NOT THE NATURE OF THE DARK FORCES WITH WHICH SHE MUST HAVE BARGAINED IN ORDER TO UNLEASH THE POWER SHE DID...*

*LAST ISSUE.

...BUT CLEARLY THEY HAVE NOW CLAIMED THEIR *STIPEND* FOR SUCH KNOWLEDGE--

HER *IMMORTAL SOUL!*

BUT...BUT IF YOU ARE *REALLY* DOCTOR STRANGE THEN YOU CAN *FIND* HER...

RESCUE HER...?

NO, MRS. CHALMERS, I CANNOT. THERE ARE SOME THINGS WHICH LIE BEYOND THE PROVINCE EVEN OF THE SORCERER SUPREME.

AND THE *FINAL JUDGMENT* OF ELSPETH CROMWELL IS SUCH A THING.

REMEMBER THIS DAY, ALMA CHALMERS, THE NEXT TIME YOU THINK TO PRY INTO YOUR NEIGHBOR'S LIVES.

REMEMBER THE TERRIBLE *PRICE* THESE PEOPLE PAID FOR YOUR ACTS!

NEXT ISSUE: **DOCTOR DOOM!?**

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THAT'S IT! I'VE HAD ENOUGH!

WHO NEEDS THE **Fantastic Four** ANYWAY?!

STAN LEE PRESENTS:

REMEMBRANCES

LIFE STINKS!

BEN GRIMM HAS HAD IT ROUGH FOR A VERY LONG TIME... EVER SINCE THAT DAY HE BECAME THE MAN-MONSTER **THING**, CRAGGY ORANGE MEMBER OF EARTH'S GREATEST SUPER-TEAM, **THE FANTASTIC FOUR**. IN RECENT MONTHS HE'S BEEN FAR FROM EARTH--ALONE ON A MYSTERIOUS PLANET CREATED BY THE **BEYONDER**. BUT NOW HE'S HOME AGAIN* ONLY TO FIND LIFE EVEN ROUGHER.

*SEE LAST ISSUE, AND FANTASTIC FOUR #277.

MIKE CARLIN	RON WILSON	BOB LAYTON	JOHN MORELLI	BOB SHAREN	MARK GRUENWALD	JIM SHOOTER
WRITER	BREAKDOWNS	FINISHES	LETTERER	COLORIST	EDITOR	EDITOR IN CHIEF

OKAY, OKAY, SETTLE DOWN, BENJY OL' BOY. THIS AIN'T THE END A' THE WORLD!

IS IT?

CIGARS

HOW COULD THEY DO THIS TA *ME*?! I'VE NEVER DONE ANYTHING TA HURT EITHER ONE A' THEM!

I CAN'T FIGURE ANY A' THIS OUT! I FEEL LIKE I'M SUPPOSED TA ACT REAL COOL AND ADULT ABOUT THE WHOLE THING--

-- WHEN WHAT I REALLY WANNA DO IS---

KRA-CHOOM

FEEL BETTER NOW, MUTTONHEAD?

NOPE.

WHAT IS THE BIG DEAL, ANYWAY?

WUZN'T YOU GONNA COME BACK TO EARTH AND BREAK UP WITH YER SWEETIE, *ALICIA*, ANYWAY?

GUESS YA DIDN'T EXPECT HER TO BE THE ONE WHO DID THE DUMPIN'!

AT FIRST I WUZ GONNA QUIT THE FF... BUT WHY SHOULD I BE THE ONE TA BEAT IT... I'M A FOUNDIN' MEMBER... MAYBE I'LL JUST MOVE OUTTA THE BAXTER BUILDING.

YEAH, THAT'S IT... I'LL GET AN APARTMENT ON MY OWN.

IT WOULDN'T BE SO BAD IF ALL I HADDA DO WUZ FERGET THE YEARS I SPENT WITH *ALICIA*... BUT I DON'T NEED MY NOSE RUBBED IN IT EVERY DAY!

WHY COULDN'T SHE JUST WALK OUT ON ME, CLEAN AN' SMOOTH? NOOOOO, SHE HAS TO GO AN' TWIST THE KNIFE!!

MAN, I BETTER GET A HOLDA MY-SELF---

---LOOK AT THIS MESS I'M MAKIN'!

SHEESH! I NEVER KNEW I HAD SO MUCH--

--JUNK.

JOHNNY... I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY WITH HER, KID. I SURE WUZ. AN' Y'KNOW WHAT? EVEN WITH ALL YER WISE GUY ROUTINES, I WUZ PRETTY HAPPY WITH YOU!

"YEP, EVEN THOUGH YOU WUZ ALWAYS PLAYIN' TRICKS ON ME, I STILL THOUGHT'A YA LIKE THE KID BROTHER I NEVER HAD. THIS HERE ROOM WUZ THE SCENE OF TONS A' YER SHENANIGANS...

WAR AND PEACE TOLSTOY

=SNNXRRXX=
=SNNNERRFF=

BLARE

WAR & PEACE

THE TWERP!!

I BET YA THINK THIS IS A LAUGH RIOT, EH, WISE GUY? BIG GAG TA SCARE THE SOCKS OFF A' SOMEONE WHO'S OUT LIKE A LIGHT, HUH?

YAAAA!!!

WELL---

...I AIN'T LAUGHIN', JUNIOR!!

CRASH

DERNED BRAT! YA'D THINK HE HAD NUTHIN' BETTER TA DO THAN TA GIVE A GUYX H ARFALNK DFWN BL NXXx

WHOEEE! IS HE MAD!

GREAT!!

IT'S NO FUN WHEN HE TRIES TO IGNORE THE FINESSE WITH WHICH I PRACTICE THE DELICATE ART OF THE HIGHLY PRACTICAL JOKE!

THIS SORT OF STUFF ONLY WORKS WHEN SOMEONE GETS GOOD AND PEEVED!

:BLRNFZZZ:

AND IF WE'RE GOING TO TALK MAD... JUST WAIT UNTIL I SNAG OL' BLUE EYES WITH THIS CLASSIC!

SNRGLFFF!

ALL I HAVE TO DO IS DIP OL' PUMICE PUSS'S LITTLE FINGER INTO THIS BOWL OF WARM WATER AND -- *WATCH OUT!*

HNNNH!! HOLD IT RIGHT THERE, WIZENHEIMER!!

OH--HI, BEN! HA HA... WHAT'S, UH, NEW AND ALL?

I'LL SHOW YA WHAT'S NEW, YA FLAMIN' FEATHER-BRAIN!

WHAT'S THE MATTER, BENJY, OL' BUDDY--

--CAN'T YOU TAKE A JOKE?

YEAH! I CAN TAKE A JOKE! I CAN ALSO TAKE YOU AND MAKE MATCHSTICKS OUTTA YA!

WHOOOAAA!!

HEY! WHERE'RE YA GOIN'? DON'TCHA KNOW--

IT'S CLOBBERIN' TIME!!

K-A-

RA-SH

YOU'RE NOT REALLY MAD, ARE YOU, OL' BUDDY?

NAH! I AIN'T MAD, KID! I LOVE YA! AN' I'M GONNA LOVE YA TA DEATH WHEN I GET MY MITTS 'ROUND YER SCRAWNY LITTLE PENCIL-NECK!

HAHAHAHA!!!

THAT'S IT! KEEP LAUGHIN' WHILE YA CAN, BOZO--

--'CAUSE YER GONNA FIND IT *HARD* TA LAUGH WITH ORANGE KNUCKLES IN YER MOUTH!

HEY! COOL IT, WILLYA, BEN! IT WAS ONLY A JOKE!

ONLY YER TWELFTH "*JOKE*" IN THE LAST TWO HOURS! I THINK THAT'S WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU, JOHNNY--

--YA JUST DON'T KNOW WHEN TA LAY OFF!

THAT'S THE SIGN OF A GOOD JOKER, KIDDO... THEY *KNOW* WHEN TA QUIT-- TA GIVE IT A RE--!

CORNERS, HUH? GIVE IT UP, TORCHIE--YA KNOW I CAN HANDLE THE CORNERS AS GOOD AS--

UH-OH! I CAN'T STOP IN TIME! AND I JUST KNOW I'M GONNA GET--

--CREAMED!!

ALL RIGHT! I GIVE UP, YA CREEP! YA GOT ME GOOD THIS TIME!

AT LEAST YA HAD THE DECENCY TA LET ME HAVE IT WITH MY FAVORITE-- BANANA MERINGUE!

GUESS I MUST... LOOK PRETTY ... HILARIOUS RIGHT NOW, HUH? *HAHAHAHA!!*

I CAN'T BELIEVE I FELL FOR THE OL' FLAMIN' DUPLICATES ROUTINE! WOTTA SAP I AM!

LIKE A TON O' ORANGE BRICKS YOU FELL! *HA HAHAHAHA!!*

I JUST KNEW YOU WOULDN'T BE MAD AT ME, BEN!

"*NAH*, I WUZ NEVER REALLY MAD AT YA, KID... SURE WANTED TA MOIDER YA SOMETIMES... BUT I STILL LOVED YA... HOW CAN YA STAY MAD AT A DUMB ANIMAL LIKE YOU, ANYWAY?

I AIN'T EVEN MAD AT YA *NOW!* IN FACT, I CAN'T EXPLAIN *WHAT* I'M FEELIN'!

MY PROBLEM IS, I CAN'T BLAME YA ONE BIT, JOHNNY. I *KNOW* WHAT A DOLL ALICIA IS... BUT IT'S JUST TOO PLAIN DANGEROUS TA BE DATIN' A MEMBER OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR... I MEAN THAT'S ONE A' THE MAIN REASONS I BUSTED UP WITH HER!

BEN?

BEN, I'D LIKE TO--!

CAN I COME IN, BEN?

I--I'D JUST LIKE TO SAY I'M SORRY THINGS HAPPENED THE WAY THEY DID.

YOU KNOW... FOR THE WEIRD SCENE THIS CAUSED WHEN YOU RETURNED FROM THAT PLANET.* I SWEAR TO YOU, BEN, I DIDN'T PLAN FOR THIS TO HAPPEN... I HONESTLY *DO* LOVE ALICIA!

BEN? ARE YOU LISTENING?

*SEE FANTASTIC FOUR #277, AGAIN.

WHY AM I TRYING TO JUSTIFY MYSELF TO HIM? HE'S NOT EVEN LISTENING TO ME! HE CAN'T MAKE ME APOLOGIZE FOR MY FEELINGS TOWARD ALICIA... I WON'T!

I'M SORRY HE'S TAKING THIS SO HARD. I GUESS I KNEW HE WOULD!

PLEASE DON'T DO THIS TO ME, BEN!

PLEASE DON'T DO THIS TO YOURSELF!

I'M SORRY, BEN... AT LEAST I TRIED!

BETTER FINISH PACKING.

WELL, WELL, WELL... WILL YA GETTA LOADA THESE TWO HANDSOME DEVILS!

WHO'DA THUNK ***REED RICHARDS*** AN' I WOULD'VE STUCK TOGETHER ALL THESE YEARS? *SHEESH*... THIS WUZ WAY BACK IN OUR COLLEGE DAYS!

I WUZN'T HALF BAD LOOKIN' THEN, WUZ I?

'COURSE REED WUZ HANDSOME ***AN'*** SMART! STILL IS!

WHILE I'M--!

JUST PACK THE MEMORY, BEN... DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT!

WHERE'D I GET ALLA THIS STUFF FROM?

PICTURES... PICTURES... AN' MORE--!

ALICIA.

AWWWWW... I DIDN'T ***NEED*** TA COME UPON ANOTHER PICTURE O' ***YOU!***

"ALICIA, HONEY... YOU'RE THE ONE WHO MADE ALLA THESE BLASTED YEARS I'VE SPENT AS THE THING BEARABLE FER ME! AN' NOW... SHOOT! I DON'T KNOW IF I'LL EVER BE ABLE TA FIND ANOTHER WHO CAN MAKE ME FEEL GOOD ABOUT MYSELF AGAIN!

"THERE'LL PROBABLY NEVER BE ANOTHER LIKE YOU... YER BLINDNESS KEPT YA FROM SEEIN' MY UGLINESS...

"...YET IT WUZ YER ARTIST'S SENSITIVITY THAT HELPED YA SEE THE REAL BEN GRIMM TRAPPED INSIDE THE THING-- BEN GRIMM, THE MAN!

"I'LL ALWAYS LOVE YA FER THAT, KIDDO, **ALWAYS**... I JUST COULDN'T SUBJECT YA TA SPENDIN' THE RESTA YER LIFE WITH A MONSTER."

SO I GUESS YA CAN TRY IT WITH JOHNNY, NOW... HE AIN'T A MONSTER LIKE ME.

BEN?

BEN, I JUST WANTED TO ASK IF THERE WAS ANYTHING I COULD DO?

C'MON, BEN, THE SILENT TREATMENT'S NOT GOING TO HELP AT ALL!

NOW, IS THERE *ANY* WAY I CAN HELP YOU?

NAH... I'LL BE ALL RIGHT, REED. NO KIDDIN'!

I THINK I'LL BE GOIN' IT ON MY OWN FER A WHILE. THAT'S ALL.

I KINDA GOT USED TA BEING ALONE ON THAT FURSHLUGGINER PLANET OF THE SECRET WARS.

THAT'S SOMETHING I'D LIKE TO--

HOLD ON, STRETCHO... BETCHA CAN'T GUESS WHAT I FOUND WHILE CLEANIN' HOUSE.

BEN... I--I DON'T KNOW.

IT'S YOU AN' ME BACK IN *EMPIRE STATE UNIVERSITY!* LOOKS LIKE IT'S TH' ONLY ONE I'LL BE TAKIN' WITH ME. THINGS SURE HAVE CHANGED SINCE BACK THEN... NO PUN INTENDED.

YOU SAID IT, OLD FRIEND. BUT, BEN, I REALLY NEED TO--

I DUNNO, REED... THIS HAS HIT ME PRETTY HARD. Y'KNOW I WUZ GONNA BREAK IT OFF WITH ALICIA ANYWAYS... I JUST WISH I HAD DEALT WITH IT BEFORE I STAYED ON AT THAT WEIRDO PLANET!

BEN... I, MYSELF, HAVE MADE A SIMILAR ERROR.

AWWW... YOU DON'T MAKE MISTAKES... YOU'RE MISTER ***FANTASTIC!***

BEN, YOU'RE NOT MAKING THIS EASY FOR ME... I'M TRYING TO HELP.

I FEAR I ***HAVE*** MADE AN ERROR... A GRAVELY SERIOUS ERROR IN JUDGMENT CONCERNING YOUR STAY ON THAT SECRET WORLD.

AND I'M NOT SURE IF WHAT I HAVE TO SAY WILL HELP OR HINDER THE SITUATION.

SPIT IT OUT, STRETCHO, I CAN TAKE IT.

I JUST WISH I'D KNOWN YOUR THOUGHTS ABOUT ALICIA THEN...

...BECAUSE I NEVER WOULD HAVE ENCOURAGED YOU TO REMAIN ON THAT PLANET!

I'D TRIED TO TELL YOU THIS, ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS. BUT--! WELL, DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN MY SON FRANKLIN WAS AGED TO FULL MANHOOD? I THOUGHT THAT IN HIS MATURED STATE HE MIGHT HAVE THE POWER TO RESTORE YOU TO YOUR HUMAN FORM PERMANENTLY? *

YEAH. I REMEMBER ALLA THAT. WHAT'RE YOU DRIVIN' AT, REED?

*FANTASTIC FOUR # 245.

FRANKLIN PROBED YOUR MIND THAT DAY, BEN... AND HE CONFIRMED THE SUSPICIONS I HAD ALL ALONG!

DEEP DOWN INSIDE, YOU WERE YOUR OWN WORST ENEMY!

YOUR FEELINGS FOR ALICIA WERE CREATING A MENTAL BLOCK PREVENTING YOU FROM CHANGING BACK INTO BEN GRIMM.

YOU HAVE ALWAYS FELT THAT ALICIA ONLY LOVED YOU AS THE THING AND NOT AS YOUR REAL SELF, BEN GRIMM. SO YOU ERECTED A MENTAL BARRIER TO PREVENT YOUR METAMORPHOSIS BACK AND FORTH AT WILL.

IF FRANKLIN AND I HAD TOLD YOU THIS -- LET ALONE DONE SOMETHING ABOUT IT -- WHEN YOU WERE STILL DEEPLY IN LOVE WITH ALICIA, IT MIGHT HAVE TRAUMATIZED YOU IRREPARABLY!

I SEE NOW, THAT, HAD I KNOWN YOUR FEELINGS FOR ALICIA HAD CHANGED, I COULD HAVE TOLD YOU THIS ***BEFORE*** YOU REMAINED ON THAT PLANET. THEREFORE, I'M SORRY YOU HAD TO WAIT SO LONG TO HEAR THIS--

YOU CAN BE BEN GRIMM AGAIN... AT WILL!!

YOU'VE ALWAYS HAD THE ***PHYSICAL*** ABILITY, BUT NOW ***MENTALLY*** YOU ARE --

YOU--KNEW?!! YOU COULD HAVE SAVED ME!!!

BEN?!!!

TAKE IT EASY, BEN... I THOUGHT--

YOU THOUGHT?! YOU THOUGHT?! MAYBE IT'S ABOUT TIME YOU STOPPED *THINKIN'*, BIG BRAIN, 'CAUSE EVERY TIME YOU DO, I END UP WORSE OFF!!

I WOULDN'T EVEN BE THE THING IF IT WASN'T FER YOU AN' YER BRIGHT IDEAS!!

BEN! WHAT ARE YOU SAY-ING?!!

I'LL TELL YA WHAT I'M SAYIN'! I'M SAYIN THAT NUTHIN' BUT BAD HAS HAPPENED TA ME SINCE I STARTED HANGIN' AROUND WITH YOU!

CALM DOWN! YOU'RE HYSTERICAL! YOU'RE STRAINING MY INJURED ARM! YOU DON'T SEEM TO REALIZE--

NO, PAL... I THINK I'M STARTIN' TA REALIZE FER THE FIRST TIME THAT ALLA MY HEADACHES--AN' HEARTACHES ARE *YOUR FAULT!*

YOU'RE THE ONE WHO TALKED ME INTA PILOTIN' YOUR EXPERIMENTAL ROCKET THE DAY THOSE COSMIC RAYS MUTATED US INTA THE FAN-TASTIC FOUR!

AN' NOW, BECAUSE YOU WITHHELD THAT LITTLE BIT OF INFORMATION, I LET YOU TALK ME INTA STAYIN' ON THAT GODFORSAKEN PLANET--

--BECAUSE YOU SAID IT WUZ ONLY *THERE* THAT I COULD BE HUMAN AGAIN WHENEVER I PLEASED!

YES, IT WAS! PSYCHOLOGICALLY SPEAKING! IT WAS PROBABLY BECAUSE YOU WERE FAR AWAY FROM ALICIA AND FAR ENOUGH ALONG WITH YOUR DECISION TO END IT WITH HER!

WHY DIDN'T YA JUST TELL ME BEFORE, REED?! *HNNH?* WHY'D YA HAFTA TRY AN' SECOND GUESS ME LIKE ALWAYS?!!

WELL, YA WANNA KNOW WHY I'M SO MAD?! YA WANNA KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TA ME ON THAT COCKAMAMY PLANET, *HUNH?!*

NOW I'M STUCK AS THE &@#*$%¤!! THING *FOREVER*, REED! I CAN NEVER BE HUMAN AGAIN, BECAUSE--

I KILLED BEN GRIMM!

BUT, THEN, HOW COULD **YOU** HAVE KNOWN THAT? YOU WERE RID OF ME FOR A FEW MONTHS... SO WHO CARES WHAT HAPPENED TO ME WHILE I WUZ GONE? I DO! WHILE I WUZ ON THAT STINKIN' PLANET THINGS HAPPENED TA CHANGE MY LIFE FER GOOD!

DON'T ASK ME HOW?, 'CAUSE I STILL DON'T KNOW, BUT THAT PLANET SPLIT MY SUBCONSCIOUS IN TWO, AN' MANIFESTED MY DARKEST TRAITS IN AN EVIL HUMAN FORM, BUT, IT WUZ **ME**-- BEN GRIMM! AN' TA SAVE MYSELF FROM TOTAL OBLIVION, I HADDA PHYSICALLY **MURDER** THAT TAINTED HUMAN INCARNATION OF MYSELF!!*

GUESS THE GOOD GUYS WON AGAIN, HUH, REED?!

4

NO!

*LAST ISSUE.

BEN--- WAIT!!

FERGET IT, **PAL!** THE WAY YA FERGOT ME FER THE LAST FEW MONTHS!!

BWOOM

HE'S *DISTRAUGHT*-- MIGHT DO SOMETHING IRRATIONAL! I'D BETTER--! NO--

PERHAPS I'VE DONE ENOUGH!

I THOUGHT I WAS HELPING HIM--

--INSTEAD I'VE ONLY MADE MATTERS IMMEASURABLY WORSE. I HAVE FAILED MY BEST FRIEND.

BEN,,, WHAT IS IT? WHAT'S--!

HEY!!

ALL RIGHT! ALL RIGHT! I GET THE MESSAGE AL-READY!

HIYA, UNCLE BEN! WANNA--!

MOMMY, WHY ISN'T UNCLE BEN ANSWERIN' ME?

I DON'T KNOW, FRANKLIN.

BEN?

PAPER 25¢

THAT'S IT! REED'S RUINED MY LIFE FOR THE LAST TIME!

HEY, WATCHOUT WHERE YER--*ULP!* IT'S DA DING!!

SORRY, MISTAH DING! I--I--!

OH, MY! HE LOOKS SO--SO *GRIM!*

HE'S SUPPOSED TO, DEAR, HE'S A SUPER HERO!

TAXI

3619-84

LOOK AT 'EM! STARIN' AN' GAWKIN'! I'M A JOKE! A MONSTER!

AN' IT'S ALL BECAUSE OF *REED RICHARDS!!*

REED, DARLING-- WHAT HAPPENED? BEN'S ROOM IS A SHAMBLES!

IT'S ALL RIGHT, SUE... IT'S OVER NOW--

--AND THIS TIME I THINK IT'S OVER *FOR GOOD!*

WHO NEEDS 'EM, ANYWAY? NOT EVER-LOVIN', BLUE-EYED ME! I DID FINE ON THAT PLANET WITHOUT 'EM!

I'M THROUGH WITH THE FANTASTIC FOUR! THIS TIME *FOR GOOD!*

NEXT

ALONE AGAIN... NATURALLY!

THE LAST GALACTUS STORY

In an unfinished Marvel classic, Galactus and Nova seek answers one hundred million years in the future at the universe's end…

THE LAST GALACTUS STORY

CHAPTER ONE: THE SHATTERED STARS

IN THE BEGINNING WAS DARKNESS, AND THE DARKNESS WAS WITHOUT FORM, AND VOID, UNTIL THE GREAT LIGHT BURST FORTH UPON THE FACE OF THE NIGHT, AND THE DARKNESS WAS FOREVER CHANGED.

THE TIME OF THAT GREAT BIRTHING IS LONG PAST. THE LIGHTS DANCE ACROSS THE GREAT EMPTINESS, SPEEDING ACROSS INFINITE SPACE, SPREADING OUT FROM CENTER!

THESE ARE NOT STARS. THESE ARE WHOLE GALAXIES, VAST SWIRLING POOLS OF A BILLION, TEN BILLION, A HUNDRED BILLION SUNS.

GREAT WHEELS OF ICY FLAME, THEY ROLL ACROSS THE BLACK, EMPTY SKY, DEFINING WITH THEIR MOVEMENTS THE SHAPE AND SUBSTANCE OF A UNIVERSE.

OUR UNIVERSE.

BUT, ALL IS NOT AS IT SHOULD BE.

ALL IS NOT WELL WITH THE UNIVERSE.

WRITTEN AND PENCILED BY **JOHN BYRNE**
INKED BY **TERRY AUSTIN**
LETTERED BY **JIM NOVAK**
COLORED BY **GLYNIS WEIN**

Epic Illustrated #26 (October 1984)

A GALAXY SPINS, BROKEN AND DYING.

IT IS NOT A FAMILIAR SIGHT, EVEN IN THE BOUNDLESS REALMS OF GALACTIC SPACE.

AND THROUGH ITS SHATTERED PINWHEEL MOVES A SINGLE GOLDEN SPARK.

UNTOUCHED BY GRAVITY POOLS, HEEDLESS OF BLINDING NEBULAE, OR HUNGRY WARPS.

SHE IS CALLED NOVA.

ONCE, LONG LONG AGO SHE HAD ANOTHER NAME, ANOTHER LIFE ALL LARGELY FORGOTTEN.

FOR, WHAT IS THE MEASURE OF HER FEW FLEETING YEARS ON A GREEN AND GROWING GLOBE A HALF A UNIVERSE AWAY?

NO MORE FOR HER THE SWEET SCENTED BREEZES OF A SUMMER NIGHT, THE COLD WHITE DAZZLE OF DEEPEST WINTER.

SHE IS A CHILD OF THE UNIVERSE, AND KNOWS NOW ONLY THE SEASONS OF THE STARS.

WHAT CAN HAVE HAPPENED HERE?

I'VE NEVER SEEN SUCH WIDE-SCALE DEVASTATION.

YES, THE SCOPE OF THE DESTRUCTION AMAZES EVEN HER, EVEN ONE WHO HAS WITNESSED THE DESTRUCTION OF UNCOUNTED MILLIONS OF WORLDS, ALL ACROSS THE UNIVERSE.

WORLDS BOTH BARREN AND POPULOUS YOUNG AND OLD, ALL BROUGHT BEFORE THE FINAL JUDGE, THE GREAT ARBITRATOR OF THEIR WORTHINESS.--

--GALACTUS!

SHE SKIRTS THE BROKEN CORONA OF A RUPTURED STAR, FEELING BRIEFLY THE FEEBLE CARESS OF ITS SUNDERED GRAVITY AGAINST HER IMPERVIOUS SKIN.

AROUND THE BLAZING CORPSE SHE LOOPS, SEEKING SOME SIGN, SOME INDICATION OF WHAT COULD HAVE HAPPENED HERE, ACROSS THIS BLASTED GALACTIC LENS.

AND, ON THE FAR SIDE OF THE STELLAR SPHERE SHE FINDS, SHE HOPES, WHAT SHE IS SEEKING...

ALONE IN THE DRIFTING REMNANTS OF ITS LUNAR FAMILY, A SINGLE PLANET IS STILL WHOLE.

BUT, AS SHE HURTLES FROM THE BRINK OF SPACE SHE WONDERS...

ROILING DUST CLOUDS PILE HIGH AGAINST THE SWOLLEN STARS. IF THE LOST CLOAK OF HER HUMANITY WERE STILL ABOUT HER SHE WOULD CHOKE IN THIS BEFOULED AIR.

THE VISTA SPREAD BENEATH THE CLOUDS OFFERS LITTLE VARIATION. THE LAND IS CRACKED AND DRY, LIKE THE PARCHMENT SKIN OF A THOUSAND-YEAR-OLD MAN.

THEN...

LIKE THE SUDDEN BONES OF SOME WAYWARD TRAVELLER COME UPON IN A TRACKLESS WASTE OF DESERT, THE TOWERS CLAW THE AMBER SKY.

LIKE THEIR WORLD THEY ARE BROKEN THINGS, CRUDE CARICATURES OF THEIR ONCE MAJESTIC SPLENDOR.

BUT NOVA KNOWS THEM INSTANTLY FOR WHAT THEY WERE.

SPACESHIPS! THOUSANDS... MAYBE ***MILLIONS*** OF THEM! BUILDING SO MANY MUST HAVE DRAINED THE RESOURCES OF THE WHOLE SYSTEM. ENOUGH, MAYBE, TO CARRY OFF THE POPULATION OF THE ENTIRE PLANET!

BUT... THEY ALL SEEM TO BE HERE. ALL THE SHIPS, STILL IN THEIR LAUNCH BAYS. AT LEAST, I SEE NO SIGN OF ANYTHING LIKE AN EMPTY GANTRY.

ALL THESE SHIPS, AND NOT ONE ESCAPED THE DESTRUCTION?

AND THERE'S SOMETHING ELSE. IT WASN'T UNTIL I SAW THIS FRAGMENT OF CIVILIZATION THAT I REALIZE A BIG PIECE OF THE PUZZLE IS MISSING.

PEOPLE! THERE'S NO SIGN OF PEOPLE, ANYWHERE. I SENSE NO LIFE OF ANY KIND ON THIS WHOLE WORLD. AND YET, I SEE NO BODIES, EITHER. NOT EVEN TRACES.

IT'S UNLIKELY THAT THE BEINGS WHO ONCE LIVED HERE HAD BODIES THAT WOULD LEAVE NO MORTAL REMAINS. THE DESIGN OF THESE SHIPS AND SUPPORTING STRUCTURES SUGGESTS CREATURES WHO WERE HUMANOID, OR SOMETHING VERY CLOSE TO IT.

STYGIAN DARKNESS CLOSES ABOUT HER AS SHE ENTERS THE RUINED STRUCTURE. BLACKNESS SO ABSOLUTE IT THREATENS TO SMOTHER EVEN HER OWN ETERNAL FLAME.

DARKNESS THAT CARRIES VAST AGE UPON ITS SLOW AND HEAVY AIR, WHISPERING OF GHOSTS, AND THINGS BEST LEFT UNSEEN.

SHE HAS SEEN THE FARTHEST REACHES OF THE UNIVERSE, ALL ITS WONDERS, AND ITS TERRORS...

...YET EVEN SHE MUST SUPPRESS A SHUDDER OF FEAR, AS THE OPPRESSIVE DARKNESS WORKS ITS MISCHIEF ON HER HIDDEN HUMAN SOUL.

STILL, SHE DOES NOT TURN BACK, AND FOR HER EFFORT, IS REWARDED, AFTER A FASHION...

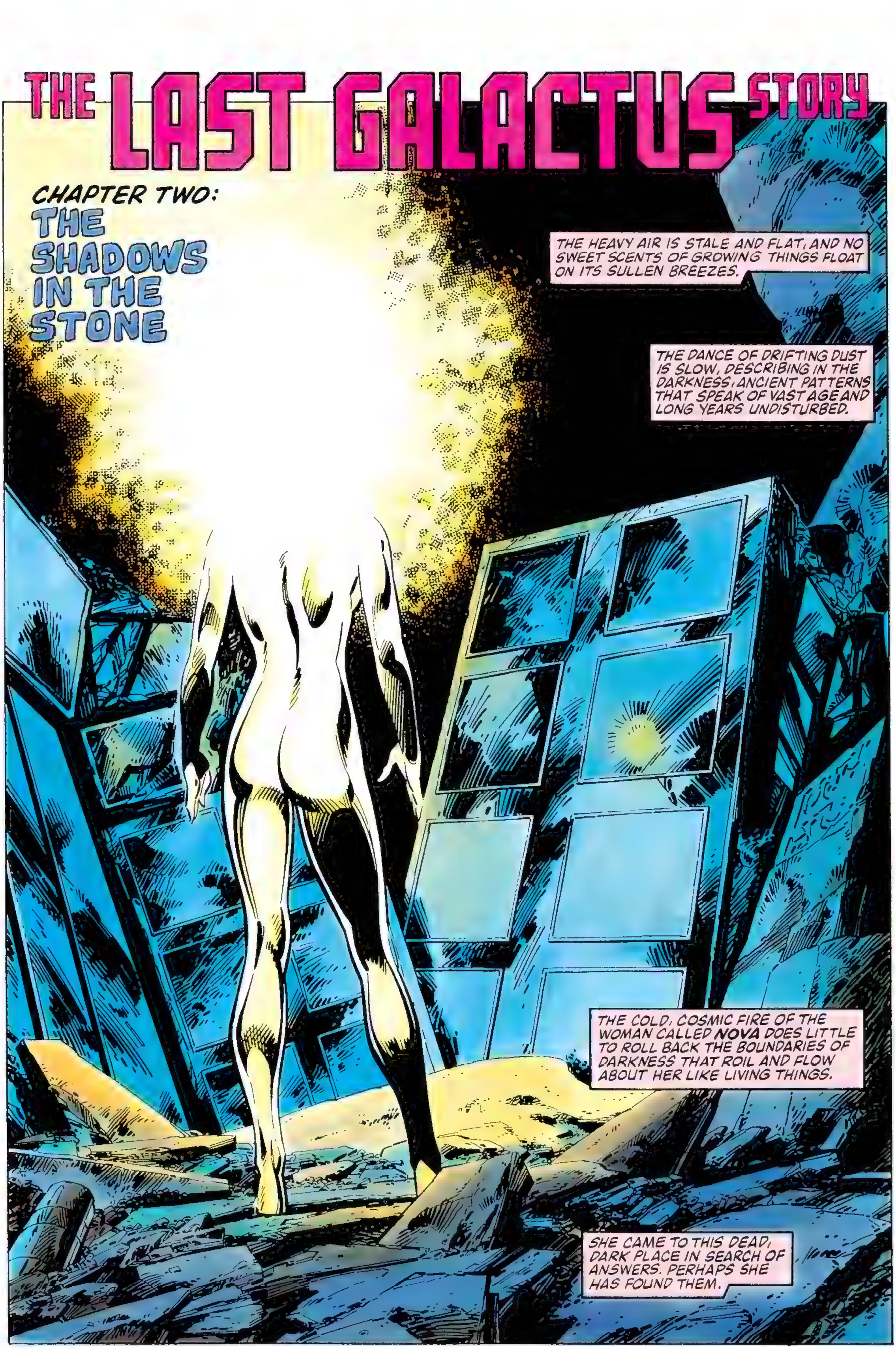
THIS DOOR WAS BUILT TO LAST *EONS*. BUILT TO *PROTECT* SOMETHING.

PERHAPS THE ANSWER?

TO BE CONTINUED

THE LAST GALACTUS STORY

CHAPTER TWO: THE SHADOWS IN THE STONE



Epic Illustrated #27 (December 1984)

SPEAKER-STONES! OR SOMETHING VERY MUCH LIKE THEM! I'VE SEEN THEIR COUSINS ON A HUNDRED DISTANT WORLDS.

BUT, NORMALLY THEY REPRESENT A DIFFERENT CULTURE, A ***VERY*** DIFFERENT CULTURE FROM THE ONE LYING IN RUINS OUTSIDE THIS HIDDEN CHAMBER.

THE SOCIETY AND TECHNOLOGY THAT CREATED ALL THOSE SPACE-SHIPS OUT ON THE SURFACE WOULD SEEM UNLIKELY TO HAVE TAKEN THE TURNS NECESSARY TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUCH STONES.

THIS CHAMBER IS AT LEAST AS OLD AS THE OTHER ARTIFACTS I'VE SEEN. THE DUST HAS BEEN GATHERING HERE FOR EONS.

THAT MAY BE PART OF THE ANSWER. WHOEVER SET THESE STONES EXPECTED IT TO BE A LONG TIME BEFORE THEY WERE SEEN AGAIN.

THEY SELECTED SPEAKER-STONE TECHNOLOGY TO CARRY THEIR MESSAGE BECAUSE THE PSIONIC IMAGERY OF THE STONES FUNCTIONS AS A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE.

GENTLE AS A MOTHER BRUSHING ERRANT STRANDS OF HAIR FROM THE BROW OF HER SLEEPING BABE, NOVA'S GOLD-SHEATHED FINGERS CARESS THE ANCIENT STONES.

A MURMUR RISES.

LIKE THE GHOSTLY CHANTINGS OF LONG DEAD HOLY MEN, THE DISTANT BURBLE OF VOICES TICKLES AT HER SENSES, ALREADY HEIGHTENED FAR BEYOND THE PALTRY HUMAN LEVELS AT WHICH SHE FIRST PERCEIVED THE UNIVERSE, SO LONG AGO.

DEEP WITHIN THE STRANGE, TRANSLUCENT STONES SHADOWS BESTIR THEMSELVES...

SHADOWS THAT REACH OUT AND TOUCH HER MIND, TO UNFOLD IMAGES LIKE MEMORIES LONG FORGOTTEN.

NOT TRUE MEMORIES, THESE. FOR THEY BELONG TO A RACE LONG DEAD, A RACE NOT HUMAN.

A RACE WHOSE MOST REMOTE ANCESTORS HAD LEARNED TO UNLOCK THE PRISON OF THE BRAIN, AND SET FREE THE MIND.

OUT OF SUCH FREEDOM HAD GROWN A CULTURE OF PEACE AND ABSOLUTE HARMONY.

THEIR BODIES SAFELY TENDED TO BY THEIR AUTOMATED SYSTEMS ON THE HOMEWORLD THEY LET THEIR UNENCUMBERED MINDS DRIFT OUT...

...FIRST ACROSS THEIR PLANET, TILL EVERY HIDDEN NOOK AND CRANNY HAD BEEN EXPLORED...

...THEN THEY TURNED THEIR THOUGHTS AND PATHS OUTWARDS, AWAY FROM THE SAFE, SECURE SOIL OF HOME...

...OUT INTO THE BOUNDLESS BEYOND, THE GREAT UNKNOWN OF SPACE.

AND THERE, WITHIN THE DARK, SWIRLING NEBULAE OF THE GALACTIC CORE THEY FOUND THE TERRIBLE SECRET, HIDDEN FOR UNTOLD MILLENNIA...

SHOCK? TERROR? SUCH WORDS HAVE NO MEANING. THE PEACEFUL STAR-SPANNING RACE HAD BEEN SHOWN THE FACE OF THEIR OWN DESTRUCTION.

THEY SOUGHT AN AVENUE, ANY AVENUE OF ESCAPE. THEY TURNED THEIR MINDS FROM ART AND BEAUTY.

ALMOST OVERNIGHT THEY BECAME SCIENTISTS, ENGINEERS, DESIGNERS. THEY RAPED THEIR WORLD, THEIR SOLAR SYSTEM, GOUGING OUT THE MATERIALS THEY NEEDED.

ACROSS THE GOLDEN PLAINS OF THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE A GREAT, GLEAMING SPACEPORT GREW, SPREADING ITS METAL TENDRILS THROUGH ROCK AND SKY ALIKE.

TWENTY MILLION SHIPS, THEY BUILT. ENOUGH TO HOUSE THE ENTIRE LIVING POPULATION OF THEIR WORLD. EVERY LIVING CREATURE THAT FLOATED, FLEW, CRAWLED, WALKED OR SWAM ACROSS THE PLANET'S SURFACES.

IT WAS A TASK UNEQUALLED IN ALL GALACTIC HISTORY.

A TASK, BY ITS VERY NATURE, ITS VERY MAGNITUDE, DOOMED TO FAILURE.

QUITE SIMPLY, IN TRYING TO SALVAGE ALL, THEY RAN OUT OF TIME, AND SALVAGED NOTHING.

THEY WERE... ***TAKEN!*** I CAN FEEL IT! I CAN FEEL THE TERRIBLE, SOUL-WRENCHING LURCH OF BEING SUDDENLY WHISKED AWAY, EVERY LIVING, SENTIENT BEING SNATCHED OFF THE PLANET!

BUT... WHO? WHAT? HOW COULD SUCH A THING BE DONE? AND WHY DID THEY EXPEND SO MUCH ENERGY TO RUN AWAY FROM IT? SO MUCH TIME AND EFFORT DEVOTED TO TRYING TO DO THEMSELVES WHAT WAS EVENTUALLY DONE ***TO*** THEM...?

NOVA!

IT IS THE BAREST TELEPATHIC TOUCH AGAINST HER MIND...

BUT IT EXPLODES HER FROM THE FALLEN SPACE-PORT, FROM THE THE PLANET, FROM THE VERY GALAXY.

OUT INTO THE COLD, DARK EMPTINESS OF INTERGALACTIC SPACE SHE FLIES, WARPING TIME AND REALITY ABOUT HER...

UNTIL THE SHIP IS NEAR.

A VESSEL SURELY FAR BEYOND MERE MORTAL COMPREHENSION. BORN OF A SCIENCE OLDER THAN HUMANKIND, OLDER THAN LOST EARTH, THAN THE VERY UNIVERSE ITSELF.

HIS SHIP.

AND HE IS GALACTUS.

DEVOURER OF WORLDS! HARBINGER OF ULTIMATE DOOM! HIS MANLIKE FORM IS ONLY IN HER EYES.

FOR HIS TRUE SHAPE IS UNGUESSED AND UNGUESSABLE. HE IS A LIVING FORCE OF NATURE.

NOVA IS HERE, O MASTER. I HAVE HEARD YOUR CALL AND STAND READY TO DO YOUR BIDDING.

THEN HEED WELL MY WORDS, MOST LOYAL OF MY HERALDS.

THE SHATTERED GALAXY FROM WHICH YOU HAVE RETURNED IS NOT UNIQUE! THE LONG RANGE SCANNERS WITHIN THIS SHIP DETECT A VAST PROCESSION OF SUCH DESTRUCTION, REACHING HALFWAY ACROSS THE UNIVERSE.

IT BEGINS QUITE NEAR THE POINT OF UNIVERSAL ORIGIN, AND ENDS AT YOUR LONG SINCE DEPARTED FORMER HOME.

THE GALAXY MEN ONCE CALLED THE MILKY WAY!

THE LAST GALACTUS STORY CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE

THE LAST GALACTUS STORY

CHAPTER THREE

RETURN OF THE EXILE

THE SHIP IS TWENTY BILLION YEARS OLD, YET IT GLEAMS AS IF NEWLY FORMED FROM SHIMMERING STAR-STUFF

LARGE ENOUGH THAT ITS PASSING WARPS THE BOUNDARIES OF GRAVITY FIELDS, AS THE FEEBLE TUG OF EVEN THE TINIEST MOON ALTERS ALMOST IMPERCEPTIBLY THE PATH DESCRIBED BY ITS PARENT WORLD...

...YET SMALL ENOUGH TO PASS UNNOTICED AGAINST THE ENDLESS BLACKNESS OF ITS NATIVE SEAS--SPACE.

OLDER, ALMOST, THAN THE OLDEST LIFE IN THE UNIVERSE IT DRIFTS BETWEEN THE SWIRLING WHIRLPOOLS OF THE GALAXIES, AND NO MIND HAS WORDS TO SAY WHAT POWER MAKES IT MOVE.

SUFFICE TO SAY IT MOVES BECAUSE ITS MASTER **WISHES** IT TO MOVE, AND LITTLE CAN DENY HIS WILL.

HE IS GALACTUS...

Epic Illustrated #28 (February 1985)

AND THIS DAY HE IS PUZZLED...

WHAT HAS HAPPENED HERE, MASTER? HOW CAN THIS WHOLE GALAXY HAVE BEEN SHATTERED --THIS, AND OTHERS LIKE IT?

THAT I DO NOT KNOW, LOYAL HERALD. THERE IS A FORCE ABROAD IN THE UNIVERSE THAT IS BEYOND EVEN THE KNOWING OF GALACTUS.

I AM OLDER THAN THE STARS, OLDER THAN TIME ITSELF. I HAVE CROSSED AND RECROSSED ALL THE MYRIAD PATHWAYS OF THIS REALITY, YET NEVER IN ALL MY JOURNEYING HAVE I ENCOUNTERED SUCH AS THIS.

THERE IS ANGUISH HERE, NOVA. THERE IS PAIN BEYOND COMPREHENSION. THE SCREAMS OF UNCOUNTED BILLIONS ECHO THROUGH THE STAR-WAYS.

I HAD THOUGHT TO HAVE SEEN ALL THE FACES OF MY DARK SISTER, DEATH, BUT THIS... IN THIS OLD UNIVERSE, THIS IS SOMETHING NEW!

BEHOLD!

COMPRESSED UPON THE SCREEN OF MY SCANNER, THE GALAXIES THAT LIE BEFORE US-- A STRING OF SHATTERED GEMS, ACROSS THE NIGHT.

AND AT THE END, AS YET UNBROKEN, THE GALAXY OF YOUR BIRTH, NOVA. THE MILKY WAY.

THE MILKY WAY...?

A TORRENT OF ANCIENT MEMORIES BURSTS FROM THE LOCKED PLACES DEEP WITHIN HER MIND.

MASTER, MAY... MAY I FLY ON AHEAD... TO INVESTIGATE...?

PERHAPS HE SENSES THERE IS MORE TO HER FEELINGS THAN IS EXPRESSED IN HER WORDS. IF SO GALACTUS DOES NOT COMMENT. INSTEAD.

GO--LOYAL HERALD, AND GALACTUS SHALL FOLLOW.

BUT HAVE A CARE, THERE MAY BE DANGERS HERE NOT EVEN YOUR POWER CAN COUNTER.

SPACE AND TIME RESHAPE THEMSELVES TO HER WILL. THE WOMAN CALLED NOVA PLUNGES THROUGH INFINITY...

UNTIL...

THE MILKY WAY. IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME. A LONG, *LONG* TIME...

THE FACE OF THE GALAXY HAS CHANGED MUCH SINCE LAST SHE PASSED THIS WAY.

THE ONCE-BUT-NO-LONGER FAMILIAR STARFIELDS HAVE NOT STOPPED THEIR RELENTLESS MARCH ACROSS THE HEAVENS.

YET ONE WHO HAS NAVIGATED ACROSS ALL CREATION DOES NOT NEED THE OLD SHAPES OF THE CONSTELLATIONS TO GUIDE HER.

INSTINCTIVELY, UNERRINGLY, SHE SEEKS OUT ONE PARTICULAR YELLOW STAR, SEEMINGLY UNCHANGED FROM THE LAST TIME SHE SAW IT.

IT WILL BE MANY THOUSANDS OF MILLIONS OF YEARS YET, BEFORE THIS BLAZING GLOBE BLOATS TO A SLUGGISH RED GIANT.

AND HERE, STILL SCRIBING ITS SEEMINGLY ETERNAL PATH SOME NINETY-FIVE MILLION MILES FROM ITS SOLAR PRIMARY, A SMALL BLUE SPHERE THAT WAS ONCE HOME TO A RACE CALLED **MAN.**

THE PLANET EARTH.

DOWN THROUGH SOFT WHITE CLOUDS SHE DROPS, HER HEIGHTENED SENSES PROBING, REJOICING...

FOR SHE FINDS HER ERSTWHILE HOMEWORLD MUCH AS SHE LEFT IT, TEEMING WITH LIFE.

BUT WHAT LIFE!?

IT'S... CHANGED. HOW COULD I HAVE DOUBTED THAT IT WOULD AFTER A HUNDRED MILLION YEARS!

CONTINUAL DRIFT HAS CARRIED THE LAND MASSES OUT OF ALL HOPE RECOGNITION. BY THE TIME OF YEAR AND PLANETARY ORIENTATION TO THE PRIMARY I'D GUESS I'M STANDING SOMEWHERE NEAR WHAT USED TO BE FLORIDA.

BUT FLORIDA NEVER HAD MOUNTAINS LIKE THAT, OR THIS KIND OF FLORA.

A HUNDRED MILLION YEARS AS FAITHFUL SERVANT TO GALACTUS HAS TAUGHT HER MUCH. SHE FEELS IN HER HEIGHTENED AWARENESS THE UNIQUE SONG OF EVERY WORLD, THE SPECIAL SYMPHONIES OF LIFE AND PLANET.

AND THE SONG OF THE EARTH IS FOREIGN, AS STRANGE AND ALIEN TO HER AS THOSE OF A BILLION DISTANT WORLDS SCATTERED ACROSS THE UNIVERSE.

THE SOFT BREEZES BRING A THOUSAND UNKNOWN SCENTS WAFTING BY, AND SHE WISHES SUDDENLY THAT SHE HAD THE POWER TO SHED THE GOLDEN SKIN SHE WEARS, AND HUMAN ONCE AGAIN, RUN NAKED THRU THE EXOTIC GRASSES.

BUT SHE CANNOT. AND ALL AT ONCE, UNBIDDEN, A HUNDRED MILLION YEARS OF OF LONGING SENDS SOBS THROUGH HER.

O, LADY, WHY DOST THOU WEEP?

TO BE CONTINUED...

THE LAST GALACTUS STORY

CHAPTER FOUR:

THE RHYMING ROBOT

ON A PLANET SHE BELIEVES **DEVOID** OF SENTIENT LIFE, THE ONCE-HUMAN **NOVA**, HERALD OF GALACTUS, HEARS A VOICE ADDRESS HER -- IN **ENGLISH!**

WHO ON EARTH...?

ON EARTH 'TIS TRUE, FOR SUCH A NAME DID THESE SWEET ROLLING HILLS ONCE PROUDLY BEAR,

AS HOME AND CHERISHED REALM TO THAT GREAT RACE WHO WERE IN NATURE'S CROWN THE BRIGHTEST GEM.

WRITTEN & PENCILED BY JOHN BYRNE

INKED BY TERRY AUSTIN

LETTERED BY JIM NOVAK

COLORED BY GLYNIS WEIN

Epic Illustrated #29 (April 1985)

WHAT?!?

I BEG FORGIVENESS IF MY WORDS UPON THINE EAR DO STRANGELY FALL.

IN SOLITUDE FULL MANY YEARS UPON THIS VERDANT GLOBE MY YEARS HAVE ALL BEEN SPENT,

AND SIMPLE CONVERSATION, AS TWIXT ONE MAN AND ANOTHER MIGHT WITH GREATEST EASE UNFOLD,

HATH FOR ME, WITH ABSTINENCE OF USE GROWN STIFF AS OLD MEN'S KNEES,

AND DOES NOT TO THE TONGUE SO QUICKLY SPRING.

UNBELIEVABLE! A HUNDRED MILLION YEARS SINCE I LAST SET FOOT ON EARTH, AND THE FIRST... PERSON I ENCOUNTER IS A ROBOT TALKING IN SOMETHING LIKE IAMBIC PENTAMETER!

WHO ARE YOU FRIEND? WHAT'S YOUR NAME?

TO SUCH AS ME, IN ELDER DAYS, NO FASHION DID ARISE,

FOR GRANTING NAMES, SUCH AS TO HUMAN BABES THE FOND REMEMBRANCE OF THEIR FATHER'S LINE MIGHT CONJURE FORTH.

I AM BUT ***LIT-ROB 839***, SUB-CATEGORY ***CLASSICAL***, AND IN THESE WORDS IS ALL THE SPAN AND MEASURE OF MY SUBSTANCE THUS REVEALED.

"LIT-ROB?" SHORT FOR "LITERATURE-ROBOT," OBVIOUSLY. BUT... WHY ON EARTH WOULD ANYONE PROGRAM YOU TO SPEAK IN SUCH AN OUTMODED FASHION? I PRESUME YOU WERE ACTUALLY PROGRAMMED TO TALK THAT WAY?

IN TRUTH I CANNOT RIGHTLY SAY, FOR LONG HAVE BEEN THE YEARS SINCE FIRST THE LIGHT OF DAY THESE HUMBLE EYES BEHELD.

I KNOW THAT IN THE VAULTS, WHEREIN MY MEMORY DOTH LIE, ARE SAFELY STORED THE FULL AND VALUED WORDS OF THAT LONG-PARTED HUMAN WHOSE ANCIENT HAND DID GUIDE HIS QUILL IN STANZAS SUCH AS THESE.

HIS NAME WAS ***SHAKE-SPEARE***, AND MY TRUST TO SAVE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS ALL HIS WORKS HAS BEEN.

TOWARD THAT END ALL KNOWLEDGE ELSE I HAVE THOUGHT MANY DAYS AND NIGHTS UNSLEEPING, ABOLISHED FROM MY HEART AND MIND, THE BETTER FOR MY LOFTY TRUST TO KEEP.

ARE YOU SAYING YOU'VE LIVED... EXISTED THROUGH ALL THE YEARS SINCE THE AGE OF MANKIND...

...AND YOU DON'T REMEMBER ***ANY*** OF IT? HOW CAN THAT BE?

AREN'T YOU PROGRAMMED, LIKE ANY ROBOT, TO RECORD ALL YOU EXPERIENCE?

'TIS TRUE

BUT FIRST AND FOREMOST IS MY CHARGE THE BLESSED BARD'S SWEET WORDS AND LILTING RHYMES TO KEEP ALIVE.

AND HAVING BUT A FINITE SPACE WITHIN THE WALLS AND TEMPLE OF MY SKULL, LEST 'CUMULATED KNOWLEDGE SOME RARE VERSE MIGHT IN A MOMENT OVERRIDE, FROM TIME TO TIME SOME OVER-CROWDING SLATE I MUST WIPE CLEAN.

AND SO I DO, RETAINING TO MYSELF SUCH THOUGHTS AND MEMORIES AS FOR MY DAY TO DAY SURVIVAL I MAY NEED.

ALL ELSE IS TO THE KEENING WINDS DISPERSED, AS IS THE CHAFF REMOVED FROM GRAIN TO MAKE IT FAIR.

AND THAT'S WHY YOU TALK THIS WAY. YOU'VE PROBABLY ENCROACHED ON YOUR LANGUAGE PROGRAMMING IN ONE OR MORE OF YOUR... PURGES.

BUT... IS THERE NOTHING YOU CAN TELL ME OF THE FATE OF HUMANKIND?

MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE, BE IT BROAD AS DAY, OR DEEPER THAN THE SEA, AVAILS ME NOT AN ANSWER FOR TO MAKE.

YET, IF YOU WISH, A PLACE EXISTS, WHICH MIGHT TO QUESTIONS SUCH AS YOURS GIVE PEACE.

AND SO...

WE'VE BEEN WALKING FOR DAYS. IF ONLY HE COULD FIND THE WORDS TO TELL US WHERE WE'RE GOING I COULD ***FLY*** US BOTH THERE.

BUT IF I ASK HIM I JUST GET A FLOWERY RUN-AROUND. HIS MEMORY-BANKS KNOW WHERE WE'RE GOING, BUT NOT HOW TO EXPRESS IT...

BEHOLD...

A CITY...?!

IN ELDER DAYS, WHEN STILL THE BUILDER'S ART WAS HELD AS WORTHY IN THE MANY TRADES OF MAN, THIS PLACE WAS SUMMONED OUT OF EMPTY AIR, SO CLOSE TO MATTERS MAGICAL HAD LATELY COME THE TALENTS OF THAT ART.

IT'S COMFORTING TO KNOW MY ANCESTORS... OR RATHER, THEIR DESCENDANTS SURVIVED SOME OF THE POTENTIAL HORRORS THEY WERE PREPARED TO UNLEASH ON THEMSELVES...

LONG ENOUGH TO CREATE SOMETHING LIKE THIS! I'M GOING TO TAKE A CLOSER LOOK...

BUT...

RUINED. AND IT MIGHT, IN ANY CASE, BE AN ALIEN PLANET. IT'S BEEN TOO LONG SINCE I WAS TRULY HUMAN.

AND IT'S OBVIOUS MANKIND EVOLVED INTO SOMETHING THAT HAD LITTLE IN COMMON WITH THE GIRL I USED TO BE.

I SHOULD FEEL SAD, I SUPPOSE, KNOWING THAT EVERYONE I KNEW AND LOVED IS GONE, DEAD AND DUST FOR A HUNDRED MILLION YEARS...

BUT I'VE SEEN THE DEATH AND DESTRUCTION OF TOO MANY WORLDS, TOO MANY RACES. I SERVE THE GREAT DEVOURER, GALACTUS, AND HE...

NOVA!

MY MASTER CALLS!

ACROSS THE BOUNDLESS GULF SHE STREAKS ONCE MORE, HOMING UNERRINGLY ON THE GREAT STAR-SPHERE AS IT ROLLS INTO EASY ORBIT ABOUT THE BRIGHT BLUE-GREEN BAUBLE, EARTH.

NOVA IS HERE, MASTER. WHAT IS YOUR COMMAND?

I AM...TROUBLED, MY HERALD. I KNOW THIS WORLD TO BE THE PLANET MEN CALL EARTH...

YET MY SCANS CAN FIND NO TRACE OF THE INHABITANTS. WHERE ARE THE PEOPLE OF THIS WORLD, NOVA?

WHERE ARE THOSE FEW MORTALS GALACTUS ONCE DARED NAME ***FRIENDS***?

MASTER...? DO YOU JEST? THEY WERE ***MORTALS***, AS YOU HAVE SAID. THEY ARE LONG SINCE...

DEAD?

YES, YES, OF COURSE. I HAD... FORGOTTEN...HOW FLEETING ARE THE LIVES OF MEN. ALL HUMAN HISTORY BUT A SINGLE TICK OF THE GREAT COSMIC CLOCK.

YOUR OWN EXTENDED LIFESPAN IS ***MY*** DOING, YET SOMEHOW... SOMEHOW I HAD HOPED YOUR FELLOW EARTHLINGS...

BUT A HUNDRED MILLION YEARS WAS TOO LONG...TOO LONG.

ENOUGH! IF THOSE I ONCE NAMED FRIENDS POSSESS THIS WORLD NO LONGER I AM AT LAST FREE OF MY ANCIENT ***OATH!***

IN ALL THE UNIVERSE THERE TURNS NO WORLD WHOSE ESSENCE IS AS STRONG AS THAT OF EARTH.

HERE IS A PLANET THAT ONCE BROUGHT FORTH A RACE OF SUPERMEN, AND HERE, TOO, IS A PLANET WHOSE SIREN CALL HAS LONG TORMENTED ME, GOADING ME IN MY ETERNAL HUNGER.

ONLY THE POWER OF MY OATH, AND MY FRIENDSHIP WITH A HANDFUL OF HUMANS HAS SAVED THIS PLANET FOR SO LONG.

THAT TIME IS PAST, AND FINALLY I MAY PLUCK FROM ITS VINE THIS SWEET AND MOST TEMPTING FRUIT.

GALACTUS IS THE GREAT DEVOURER. NOW LET GALACTUS ***FEED!***

TO BE CONTINUED

THE LAST GALACTUS STORY

CHAPTER FIVE: THE END OF THE EARTH

THIS, THEN, IS THE PLANET OF YOUR BIRTH, NOVA? IT HAS CHANGED *MUCH* SINCE *GALACTUS* LAST WALKED HERE.

THAT *WAS* ONE HUNDRED MILLION YEARS AGO, MASTER.

Epic Illustrated #30 (June 1985)

ONE HUNDRED MILLION YEARS? THE BAREST BLINK OF AN EYE, TO ONE WHOSE SPAN OF YEARS IS MEASURED IN ***BILLIONS.***

YET, IT IS ***TRUE*** THAT EVEN IN SO SHORT A SPAN THE CONTINENTS CAN ROLL APART, BIRTHING NEW MOUNTAINS, NEW SEAS.

AND ***LIFE***, EVER THE GREAT ADAPTOR, CAN FILL THE NEW OCEANS, THE VIRGIN PEAKS. SO IN ONE HUNDRED MILLION YEARS A PLANET CAN COMPLETELY CHANGE ITS SHAPE AND SUBSTANCE.

IT MATTERS NOT. ***GALACTUS*** IS NOT HERE TO MUSE ON NATURE'S INCONSTANCY. ***GALACTUS*** IS HERE TO ***FEED.***

THEN I BEG ONE ***FAVOR***, MASTER, BEFORE YOU DRAW THE LIFE-ESSENCE FROM MY ONE-TIME HOMEWORLD.

A FEW THOUSAND MILES FROM HERE IS A CITY... THE LAST VESTIGE OF MY HUMAN ANCESTORS.

I WOULD LIKE TO ***SAVE*** IT, IF I CAN.

YOUR SENTIMENT ***SURPRISES*** ME, MY HERALD. BUT... DO AS YOU WISH.

IT'S NOT JUST SENTIMENT THAT MAKES ME WANT TO SAVE THAT CITY. THERE'S A ***MYSTERY*** UNFOLDING OUT THERE IN THE UNIVERSE, THE MYSTERY THAT LED ***GALACTUS*** BACK TO EARTH AFTER ALL THESE ***CENTURIES.***

AND I THINK AN ANSWER-- OR AT LEAST PART OF AN ANSWER--MAY LIE WITHIN THIS ANCIENT DWELLING-PLACE.

SHAKESPEARE! *SHAKESPEARE!* WHERE... OH, THERE YOU ARE.

AS CONSTANT AS THE ROCKY BROW THAT OVERHANGS...

NEVER MIND THAT NOW. FIND YOURSELF A SECURE PLACE AND BATTEN DOWN THE HATCHES.

THIS OLD PLANET IS ABOUT TO BECOME *HISTORY*, BUT IF I TIME IT RIGHT YOU AND THIS CITY WILL *SURVIVE*.

NOW GET INSIDE-- *QUICKLY!*

I GO, MY LADY.

MORE SWIFTLY THAN THE ARCHER'S SHAFT, WHICH FROM HIS MIGHTY BOW DOTH FLY ON WINGS OF...

ELSEWHERE...

LET IT NOW *BEGIN!*

AND FOR WHAT FOLLOWS...

...THERE CAN BE NO WORDS.

HANG ON, SHAKESPEARE!!

WHAT TASK, MASTER?

THE TRAIL OF *EXPLODED GALAXIES* LEADS TO THIS LENS, AND NOT BEYOND.

WHATEVER SECRET LIES BEYOND THIS PROCESSION OF DESTRUCTION IT WILL BE FOUND *THERE...*

NOVA!

MASTER?

I HAVE *CONSUMED* THE LIFE-ESSENCE OF THE PLANET. IT WAS, AS I HAD LONG SUSPECTED THE RICHEST GEM IN THE UNIVERSE.

I AM *REPLENISHED.*

NOW WE MUST *ACCEPT* THE TASK THAT FATE HAS CLEARLY DEALT US.

...AT THE CORE OF THE MILKY WAY!

THE LAST GALACTUS STORY CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE

THE LAST GALACTUS STORY

CHAPTER SIX
THE HIDDEN STARS

Epic Illustrated #31 (August 1985)

IT SEEMS STRANGER TO MY EYES THAN TO YOURS, MASTER.

IN ONE HUNDRED MILLION YEARS THE RACE OF MY ANCESTORS OBVIOUSLY CHANGED A GREAT DEAL.

BY THE TIME THEY BUILT THIS PLACE THEY HAD VERY LITTLE IN COMMON WITH THE SHAPE AND SUBSTANCE OF THE PEOPLE I ONCE KNEW.

INDEED, **GALACTUS** HAS LONG BEEN ***BEYOND*** THE SHAPING HAND OF EVOLUTION, THUS I AM SOMETIMES ***ASTOUNDED*** BY THE CRAFTING OF LIFE NATURE CAN ACHIEVE.

COME NOW. LET US SEEK AN ENTRY TO ONE OF THE LESS DAMAGED BUILDINGS...

AND LEARN, IF WE MAY WHAT SECRETS LIE WITHIN...

REMEMBERING STILL ITS ANCIENT FUNCTION THE OLD WALL SHIFTS, ALTERING EVEN AT ITS MOLECULAR LEVEL...

...AND PERMITTING THE TWO VASTLY DIFFERENT LIFE-FORMS TO PASS AS EASILY THROUGH ITS SOLID SUBSTANCE AS A HAND MIGHT PASS THROUGH A SUMMER'S BREEZE.

IT'S *FANTASTIC!* CAN THIS REALLY HAVE BEEN A DWELLING PLACE?

THERE'S NOTHING EVEN REMOTELY LIKE THE KIND OF NORMAL HUMAN REFERENCE POINTS I'D EXPECT.

IT'S MORE LIKE... LIKE THE INSIDES OF A *LIVING THING.*

THE AIR ITSELF SEEMS ALMOST ALIVE AND...

...SINGING...?

I SENSE IT TOO, MY HERALD. A LONG, SAD SONG. A HYMN TO THE DEPARTED SOULS THAT ONCE DWELT WITHIN THIS CITY.

IT TOUCHES EVEN *GALACTUS*. IT TOUCHES THE SECRET, HIDDEN PLACES OF MY HEART.

BUT HOLD! THERE IS NOW *ANOTHER* SIGNAL. MY *SHIP* NOW SPEAKS TO ME.

THE TIME FOR QUIET CONTEMPLATION IS *PASSED.* WE APPROACH OUR *GOAL.*

YES... THERE AHEAD OF US LIES THE GREAT MAELSTROM OF STARS THAT IS THE ***CORE*** OF THIS GALAXY. THE ***HUB***, ABOUT WHICH THE STELLAR WHEEL TURNS.

BUT... WHY IS IT SO ***DARK?*** MASTER, SURELY, IT SHOULD BURN WITH ALL THE BRILLIANCE OF A BILLION SUNS?

IT ***SHOULD***, MY LOYAL NOVA. BUT AS MY LONG RANGE SCANNERS HAVE ALREADY INFORMED ME, THERE IS A BLACK ***NEBULA*** COMPLETELY SURROUNDING THE CORE. A SHELL OF GAS AND DUST THAT SWALLOWS LIGHT.

INCREDIBLE! I HAVE SEEN THE ROLLING CLOUDS OF SPACE IN ALL THEIR MYRIAD FORMS, SOME DARK AND TERRIBLE, BUT NEVER ONE SO ***HUGE***, SO UTTERLY DEVOID OF FEATURES.

WHAT DO YOU INTEND TO DO ***NOW***, MASTER?

EXPLORE FURTHER, OF COURSE.

GALACTUS HAS A THIRST FOR ***KNOWLEDGE*** SURPASSED ONLY BY THE COSMIC ***HUNGER*** THAT DRIVES HIM.

I DETECT UNUSUAL, ***UNNATURAL*** FIELDS OF ENERGY DEEP WITHIN THIS NEBULA.

THERE ARE DELICATE BALANCES HERE WHICH MY ***SHIP*** MIGHT DISRUPT BEFORE ***GALACTUS*** CAN PROPERLY STUDY THEM.

THUS MUST ***GALACTUS*** LEAVE THE HOLLOW WORLD OF THIS ANCIENT VESSEL AND STEP ONCE MORE INTO THE UNENDING SEA OF SPACE.

AROUND HIM IS HARD VACUUM, THE TEMPERATURE CLOSE TO ABSOLUTE ZERO.

*BUT **GALACTUS** DOES NOT CARE.*

THE EDGES OF THE NEBULA BEGIN TO COIL ABOUT ME.

THE BLACKNESS IS TOTAL. EVEN THE EYES OF ***GALACTUS*** ARE OF NO USE HERE.

BUT ***GALACTUS*** HAS SENSES BEYOND AND BEYOND THOSE FEW OF MORTAL-KIND.

GALACTUS DOES NOT ***NEED*** EYES.

UNERRINGLY THE PROBING MIND OF THIS FIRST-BORN OF THE UNIVERSE REACHES OUT, SIFTING THROUGH THE WHIRLING MIASMA OF DUST AND GAS.

THIS WAY! THE ***SECRET*** LIES THIS WAY!

NOW. THE INNER PERIMETER OF THE NEBULA IS NEAR, JUST AHEAD. SOON ***GALACTUS*** SHALL BEHOLD THE ENIGMA THAT CROUCHES WITHIN THIS MIGHTY CLOUD.

NEXT: THE TUNNEL IN THE SKY

THE LAST GALACTUS STORY

CHAPTER SEVEN: TUNNEL IN THE SKY

THE COLD IS NEARLY ABSOLUTE, ENOUGH TO FREEZE THE BILLOWING BLANKET OF A PLANET'S ATMOSPHERE INTO A SLENDER SHELL OF ICE, BUT HE DOES NOT NOTICE IT.

THE HUNGRY MAW OF VACUUM SUCKS AT HIM FROM ALL DIRECTIONS. SEEKING TO EXPLODE HIM INTO THE VOID, HE PAYS NO HEED.

HE IS GALACTUS.

HE IS OLDER THAN SPACE, OLDER THAN TIME. A LIVING FORCE OF NATURE. BORN IN THE CATACLYSMIC DEATH OF A UNIVERSE BEYOND OUR OWN.

HE HAS SEEN MUCH IN A LIFETIME MEASURED IN THE AGE OF STARS, AND HAD THOUGHT HIMSELF BEYOND AMAZEMENT... UNTIL NOW.

Epic Illustrated #32 (October 1985)

THE STARS HAVE BEEN... MOVED... ARRANGED AS A CHILD MIGHT STRING A HANDFUL OF COLORED BEADS.

NOT EVEN *GALACTUS* HAS THE POWER TO DO SUCH A THING. WHO CAN HAVE ENGINEERED SO AWESOME A CONSTRUCT?

AND *WHY?*

IT PIERCES THE GALACTIC CORE AS STRAIGHT AND SURE AS A BEAM OF COHERENT LIGHT!

AND AROUND THIS ***TUNNEL IN THE SKY*** THE BLACK CLOUDS OF GALACTIC NEBULAE CROUCH ENCLOSING IT.

NONE OF THIS COULD HAVE HAPPENED NATURALLY; NOT EVEN IN THE VAST SCOPE OF COINCIDENCE IN THE BREADTH OF THE UNIVERSE.

THUS, GALACTUS HAS A NEW PURPOSE TO SHAPE HIS LIFE.

I MUST SEEK OUT THE PERPETRATOR OF THIS INSULT TO THE NATURAL ORDER.

FOR I FEEL IN EVERY FIBRE OF MY BEING THAT NO GOOD MAY COME OF THIS UNDERTAKING...

FOR MORE THAN A DAY THE FORCE OF HIS WILL PROPELS GALACTUS DOWN THE LONG CENTER OF THIS AVENUE OF STARS...

UNTIL...

SOMETHING LIES AHEAD-- SOMETHING *HUGE*...

THESE ARE ENTIRE PLANETS, MOVED INTO SYMMETRICAL ALIGNMENT BY SOME UNKNOWN HAND.

A PALTRY THING INDEED, AGAINST THE BALANCE OF SO GREAT A TASK AS THE MOVING OF A HUNDRED MILLION STARS.

YET STILL AN ACHIEVEMENT OF CONSIDERABLE MAGNIFICENCE, FOR I SENSE THESE GLOBES ARE STILL STABLE, LIFE-BEARING WORLDS.

TO HAVE MOVED THESE WORLDS, TO HAVE COUNTERED THE CATACLYSMIC EFFECTS ON THEIR GRAVITATIONAL FIELDS AND BIO-SPHERES WOULD REQUIRE A POWER BEYOND ANY I HAD THOUGHT TO EXIST IN THIS UNIVERSE.

THE GODS THEMSELVES MIGHT QUAIL BEFORE THE ENORMITY OF SUCH AN UNDERTAKING.

STILL, THIS PONDERING LEAVES EVERY QUESTION STILL UNANSWERED.

AND IF ANSWERS THERE BE...

THEY'LL LIE, IN PART AT LEAST, UPON THE SURFACE OF THESE DANGLING ORBS.

AROUND HIM THE AIR BEGINS TO BOIL, AS GALACTUS PLUNGES DEEPER INTO THE YIELDING BLANKET OF THE ATMOSPHERE.

HIGHER AND HIGHER CLIMBS THE TEMPERATURE, AS HE DROPS LOWER AND LOWER, FEELING THE EMBRACE OF GRAVITY GROWING STRONGER ABOUT HIM.

BUT NEITHER HEAT NOR INCREASE OF WEIGHT DISTURB HIM ANY MORE THAN DID THE HARD, COLD NIGHT ABOVE.

THE LAST GALACTUS STORY

RUN! RUN! FLEE FOR YOUR LIVES!!

CHAPTER EIGHT:
THE DWELLER IN DARKNESS

Q'PAK! WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS UNSEEMLY OUTBURST?

EXPLAIN YOURSELF!!

FORGIVE ME, *ALL-FATHER.*

BUT IT IS DIFFICULT TO MAINTAIN COMPOSURE WHEN ONE HAS SEEN THE LIVING FACE OF THE *DEVOURER!*

THESE ARE WORDS MOST UNSUITABLE, EVEN FOR ONE OF *YOUR* JESTS, Q'PAK!

HE DOES NOT JEST, ALL-FATHER!

Epic Illustrated #33 (December 1985)

SHAN-SAN! WHAT DO YOU KNOW OF THIS MATTER?

SPEAK QUICKLY, OR STAND WITH Q'PAK ON THE PUNISHMENT BLOCK!

I... WAS WITH Q'PAK WHEN THE DEVOURER ARRIVED, ALL-FATHER!

I HAVE SEEN WITH MY OWN EYES THE FIRE IN THE SKY, AND FELT THE EARTH THUNDERING AT HIS COMING.

THIS IS NOT GOOD, SHAN-SAN! YOU ARE THE PROMISED OF Q'QRAK.

TO HAVE BEEN OUTSIDE THE COMPOUND WITH Q'PAK...

IT WAS NOT HER FAULT, ALL-FATHER! I HAVE PURSUED SHAN-SAN FOR MANY TURNINGS!

I KNEW HER TO BE PROMISED TO ANOTHER, BUT MY OWN FIRES WOULD NOT HEED THE CUSTOM.

FASCINATING!

AM I TO BE SO EASILY FORGOTTEN?

IT IS HIM!

IT IS THE GREAT DEVOURER!

FLEE! FLEE!

Q'PAK WAS RIGHT! IT IS THE END OF THE WORLD!!

THERE IS NO ESCAPE! NO ESCAPE!

A MOMENT, SMALL MORTAL.

YOU HAVE THE LOOK ABOUT YOU OF ONE WHO IS POSSESSED OF *KNOWLEDGE.*

PERHAPS EVEN SOME SMALL *FRAGMENT* OF THE KNOWLEDGE I SEEK.

SPEAK TO ME, SMALL ONE. TELL ME WHAT IS KNOWN OF THIS GREAT *WEB OF STARS.*

THE DEVOURER ASKS *ME* FOR KNOWLEDGE? IS NOT THE DEVOURER KNOWLEDGE *INCARNATE?*

HAS NOT THE DEVOURER DRUNK DEEP OF THE LIVES OF A BILLION, BILLION WORLDS, OVER A BILLION BILLION LIFETIMES?

ARE WE NOT *HERE*, SO FAR FROM THE STARS OF HOME, *BECAUSE* OF THE DEVOURER?

EXPLAIN.

"DO YOU ***MOCK*** ME, DEVOURER? YOU, WHO ARE ALL-KNOWING, PRETEND IGNORANCE OF OUR ANCIENT LEGENDS, OUR TALES OF A ONCE MIGHTY AND PROUD CIVILIZATION.

"ONE DAY ***SHATTERED*** LIKE THE CRYSTAL BLOSSOMS OF THE AERDNA TREE, AS THE ***SUN*** GREW SUDDENLY ***DISTANT*** IN THE SKY.

"AS A DEEP AND CHILLING ***NIGHT*** FELL ACROSS ALL THE WORLD.

"UNTIL, WITHOUT WARNING, SIX ***NEW SUNS*** APPEARED, BRINGING WARMTH, AND A STRANGE, CONSTANT DAY.

"ACROSS OUR SKIES THEY TURNED, AND BEYOND THEM, DIMLY, THE ONCE FAMILIAR STARS SHIFTED IN THEIR ETERNAL PATHS.

"ONLY OUR WISEST ELDERS DARED SPEAK THE TRUTH THEY GUESSED. ***OUR PLANET WAS BEING MOVED!!***"

YOUR WORDS HAVE THE SOUND OF TRUTH IN THEM, SMALL ONE. HOW ELSE COULD ONE FROM SO PRIMITIVE A CULTURE EVEN BEGIN TO ***GUESS*** AT SUCH CONCEPTS.

BUT, MY GREATEST QUESTION REMAINS UNANSWERED. WHY DO YOU SAY ***I*** AM THE REASON FOR THIS STRANGE MIGRATION?

BECAUSE YOU ARE THE DEVOURER.

AND IT IS TOLD IN OUR MOST ***ANCIENT*** LEGENDS THAT OUR TREK ACROSS THE GALAXY WAS, IN SOME WAY, PART OF A GREAT PLAN TO SAVE US FROM YOUR ***HUNGERS.***

THE PLAN OF THE ***ONE*** WHO DWELLS IN ***DARKNESS.***

DARKNESS? AND WHERE, IN THIS BRIGHT TUNNEL OF STARS, MIGHT ANY PLACE BE CALLED ***DARK?***

THE LEGENDS DO NOT NAME THE WORLD, DEVOURER. ONLY THAT IT IS A PLACE OF UNENDING BLACKNESS, WITH A HUNGER TO MATCH YOUR OWN.

AH! AT LAST! THERE IS SENSE TO YOUR WORDS!

NOVA!

NOVA!

NOVA!

NOVA!

NOVA!

NOVA!

NOVA!

HE DOES NOT SPEAK ALOUD, BUT THE SINGLE WORD SEEMS TO REVERBERATE ACROSS THE COSMOS...

...UNTIL, A THOUSAND LIGHT YEARS ACROSS THE **VOID** IT TOUCHES **OTHER MINDS**...

MASTER?

YES. COME TO ME, MY LOYAL **HERALD**. MEET ME AT THE GALACTIC **CORE**.

AND HAVE A CARE, NOVA. I SENSE GREAT **DANGER** THERE.

'TIS PASSING STRANGE!

FROM OUT THE BLACK UNYIELDING NIGHT, AS IF ON ANGEL'S WINGS, WORDS, LIKE DROPS OF RAIN THAT SHAKE THE LEAVES OF SUMMER'S BONNET...

TOUCHING UPON THESE THOUGHTS AND ANCIENT MEMORIES WHICH, IN THE HOLLOW CIRCLE OF MY HEAD...

CAN IT, SHAKE-SPEARE!

THAT WAS **GALACTUS**. HE **NEEDS** ME.

AND I MUST **GO** WHEREVER HE COMMANDS.

THE STARS SEEM TO BE THINNING OUT.

IT'S THE WALL OF ***DUST*** GALACTUS PENETRATED.

WHATEVER IS AT THE ***HEART*** OF THIS MYSTERY MUST LIE BEYOND.

BUT... GALACTUS HIMSELF ISN'T AT THE CORE YET. I SENSE HIM OFF SOME WAYS, IN THE SOUTHERN HALF OF THE GALACTIC LENS.

INTO THE SWIRLING BLACKNESS SHE PLUNGES...

AND DEEP WITHIN HER BREAST SOMETHING THAT MIGHT ONCE HAVE BEEN A HUMAN SOUL TREMBLES...

*AND IS SUDDENLY **TRANSFIXED!***

WHAT IN... ?!?

IT LOOKS MAN-MADE! NO, SCRATCH THAT. MAKE IT *ARTIFICIAL.*

BUT I'VE NEVER SEEN AN ARTIFACT *SO HUGE!* IT MUST BE A *BILLION MILES ACROSS!!*

WHAT CAN IT IT BE? IT... REMINDS ME OF SOMETHING.

SOMETHING VERY OLD...

BUT... I CAN'T PUT A FINGER ON IT.

THAT LOOKS LIKE AN ACCESS TO THE INTERIOR. I SHOULD CHECK IT OUT.

BUT... I'M NOT ASHAMED TO ADMIT, I'M MORE THAN A LITTLE SCARED.

THIS IS INCREDIBLE!! I'M TRAVELLING AT *LIGHT SPEED*...

...YET I'M *INSIDE* A MECHANICAL CONTRIVANCE!

THE SCALE OF THIS THING IS...

UNBELIEVABLE!!!

GIANT *PHOTON RAM TUBES!!* OF COURSE!

THAT'S WHY THIS THING SEEMS FAMILIAR! IT'S A GIGANTIC *PHASED PLASMA ENGINE!*

A ROCKET!!

BUT... WHAT COULD POSSIBLY BE THE POWER SOURCE???

THE ANSWER CAN ONLY LIE SOMEWHERE NEARER THE CENTER.

AND THAT CENTER MUST CORRESPOND TO THE ACTUAL POSITION OF THE GALACTIC CORE!

WHICH ONLY MAKES SENSE, NOT THAT I THINK ABOUT IT. TO CONSTRUCT SOMETHING THIS ***HUGE*** WOULD HAVE REQUIRED ALL THE MATERIAL OF HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS... PERHAPS EVEN ***BILLIONS*** OF STAR SYSTEMS!

BUT... BUT WHAT KIND OF BEINGS COULD HAVE ACCOMPLISHED SUCH A TASK?

THEIR POWER WOULD HAVE TO BE ON AN ALMOST ***DIVINE*** SCALE... OR WOULD IT? THE PHAROAHS OF OF OLD EGYPT ACCOMPLISHED FEATS OF ENGINEERING SOMETIMES THOUGHT BEYOND THE SKILLS OF THE 20TH CENTURY EARTH THAT USED TO BE MY HOME!

BUT THEY ACCOMPLISHED THEM WITH ***SLAVE LABOR*** --AND THEY DIDN'T CARE HOW MANY SLAVES THEY ***KILLED*** DOING IT.

ONLY, THE RACE CAPABLE OF BUILDING THIS MAGNIFICENT ARTIFACT WOULD HAVE TO BE MORE... ***BENIGN***... WOULDN'T THEY?

THIS ***COULDN'T*** BE THE WORK OF GALACTIC SLAVE-DRIVERS.

I ***CAN'T*** BELIEVE THAT!

IF THEY ***WERE*** SO CONTEMPTIBLE, WE'D SURELY HAVE ***ENCOUNTERED*** THEM BY NOW. BEINGS OF SUCH ***POWER***, WITH SUCH LOW MORAL STANDARDS, WOULD HAVE NO REASON TO STAY OUT OF THE SIGHT OF GALACTUS.

OF COURSE... THERE ARE SOME WHO WOULD SUGGEST THAT GALACTUS HIMSELF IS HARDLY BEYOND REPROACH. HE'S INDIRECTLY SLAUGHTERED TRILLIONS OF LIFE-FORMS, ANNIHILATED ENTIRE RACES.

YET, I BELIEVE AS I HAVE ALWAYS BELIEVED. THAT THERE IS ***MORE*** TO HIM THAN JUST COSMIC ***BUTCHERY***. I...

WAIT A MINUTE...

SOMETHING IS AFFECTING MY SUB-SPACE NAVIGATIONAL SENSE. SOME VAST POCKET OF ***NEGATIVE FORCE*** AHEAD OF ME.

IT'S GETTING ***STRONGER!*** IT MUST BE THE MOST POWERFUL N-FIELD I'VE EVER...

OH... MY... SWEET...

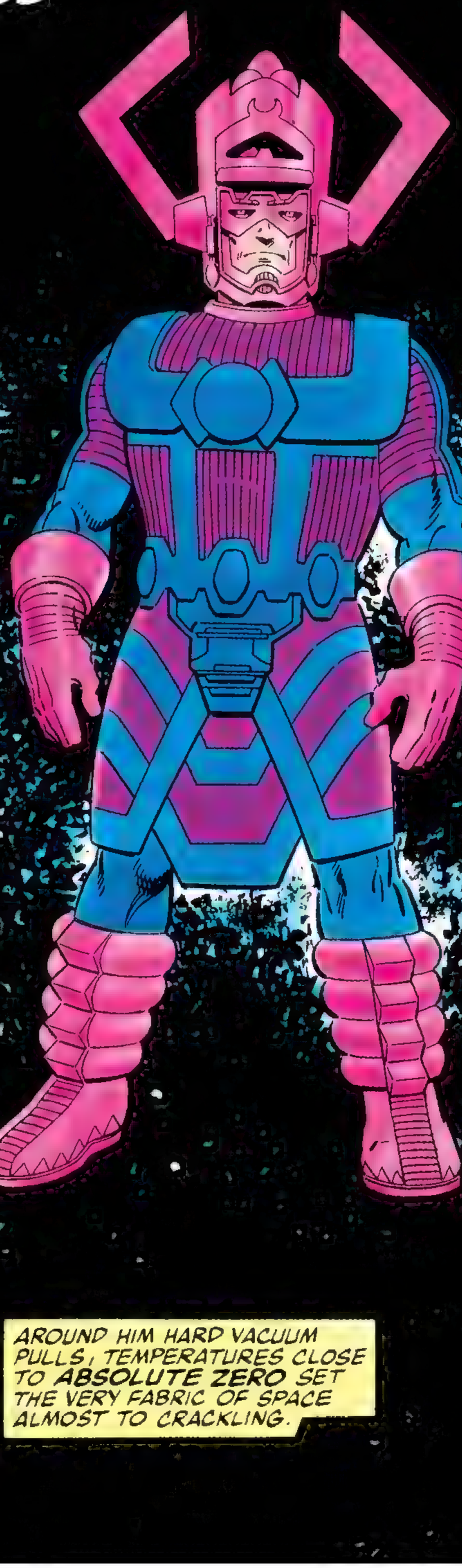
IT CAN'T BE!!

BUT IT *IS*!! IT'S A *BLACK HOLE*!!

A BLACK HOLE BIG ENOUGH TO SWALLOW THE WHOLE CENTER OF THE GALAXY!!!

THE LAST GALACTUS STORY

CHAPTER NINE: THE FACE OF THE FOE



NOVA!

WITH SOMETHING VERY CLOSE TO URGENCY THE TELEPATHIC SIGNAL RINGS OUT.

TIME AND DISTANCE SHRINK TO INSIGNIFICANCE AS THE PROBING MIND OF **GALACTUS** SIFTS THROUGH THE SWIRLING COSMOS.

NOVA!

HE IS SEARCHING FOR HIS **HERALD**, THE HARBINGER OF HIS POWER, WHO SHOULD HAVE MET HIM NEAR THE CO-ORDINATES HE NOW OCCUPIES.

AROUND HIM HARD VACUUM PULLS, TEMPERATURES CLOSE TO **ABSOLUTE ZERO** SET THE VERY FABRIC OF SPACE ALMOST TO CRACKLING.

GALACTUS FEELS NEITHER. HE CONCENTRATES ON HIS MISSING SERVANT, AND THE STRANGE FEELINGS THAT STIR WITHIN HIS BREAST.

Epic Illustrated #34 (February 1986)

ONCE, IN A TIME BEYOND KNOWING, **GALACTUS** WORE ANOTHER FORM AND WALKED THE SCENTED SOIL OF A LONG LOST WORLD, MORTAL AS ANY MAN OF ANCIENT **EARTH.**

IN THE UNCOUNTABLE EONS SINCE HIS RE-BIRTH HE HAS COME TO BELIEVE HIMSELF AT LAST BEYOND THE REACH OF HUMAN PASSIONS.

PERHAPS HE WAS **WRONG.**

M-MASTER...!

A TINY THING, BUT IT FLARES ACROSS THE MIND OF **GALACTUS** LIKE ANGELS TRUMPETTING.

HIS HERALD HAS HEARD HIM, AND RESPONDS.

BUT THE ENERGY BEHIND THE SIGNAL IS SO WEAK, BETOKENING A LIFE-FORM WHOSE GRIP UPON THIS EXISTENCE HAS GROWN SO FRAIL, THAT SOMETHING LIKE A **CHILL** PIERCES **GALACTUS**, AND SOMETHING MUCH LIKE **ANGER** BEGINS TO BOIL WITHIN HIM.

FASTER THAN LIGHT, FASTER THAN THOUGHT ITSELF, THE FORCE OF HIS WILL PROPELS HIM THROUGH THE BLACK CLOUDS OF SPACE DUST SURROUNDING THE GALACTIC CORE.

FRAGILE A THING AS IT WAS, THE SIGNAL OF HIS HERALD HAS BLAZED A HOMING BEACON ACROSS THE DARKNESS, AND **GALACTUS** FOLLOWS IT AS SURELY AS AN ARROW FROM A BOW.

FOLLOWS IT...

...AND AS HE PENETRATES THE LAST OBSCURING LAYERS OF DUST...

...WE MAY WELL WONDER IF -- AFTER ALL HE HAS KNOWN IN A LIFETIME MEASURED IN **BILLIONS OF YEARS** -- **GALACTUS** CAN STILL KNOW **SURPRISE.**

BUT WHATEVER THE EMOTIONS HE MAY EXPERIENCE AT THE SIGHT OF THIS SOLAR-SYSTEM-SIZED CONSTRUCT, THEY DO NOT SHOW THEMSELVES ON HIS EVER-IMPLACABLE VISAGE.

INSTEAD, HE INSTANTLY DEDUCES THE PURPOSE OF THE THING, AND ENTERS IT AS ONLY **HE** CAN.

THERE IS NO AIR IN SPACE TO CARRY THE **SOUND** OF HIS EXPLOSIVE INGRESS, BUT THE STRUCTURE SEEMS TO SHUDDER ACROSS ALL ITS VAST BULK.

INSIDE THERE ARE WONDERS ENOUGH TO DAUNT THE FINEST ANALYTICAL MIND, BUT **GALACTUS** PAYS THEM NO HEED.

IN TRUTH IT MIGHT BE SAID THAT HE IS NO MORE CONCERNED BY THE COMPLEXITIES AROUND HIM THAN IS A PLANET-DWELLER BY THE DUST MOTES THAT DANCE ETERNALLY IN THIS WORLD'S ENVELOPE OF AIR.

UNTIL...

NOVA!

NOVA! WHAT HAS HAPPENED? WHO HAS DONE THIS TO YOU?

...M-MASTER...? I... DO NOT KNOW, MASTER. I WAS... TAKEN BY SURPRISE.

I DID NOT HAVE A CHANCE TO SEE WHO ATTACKED.

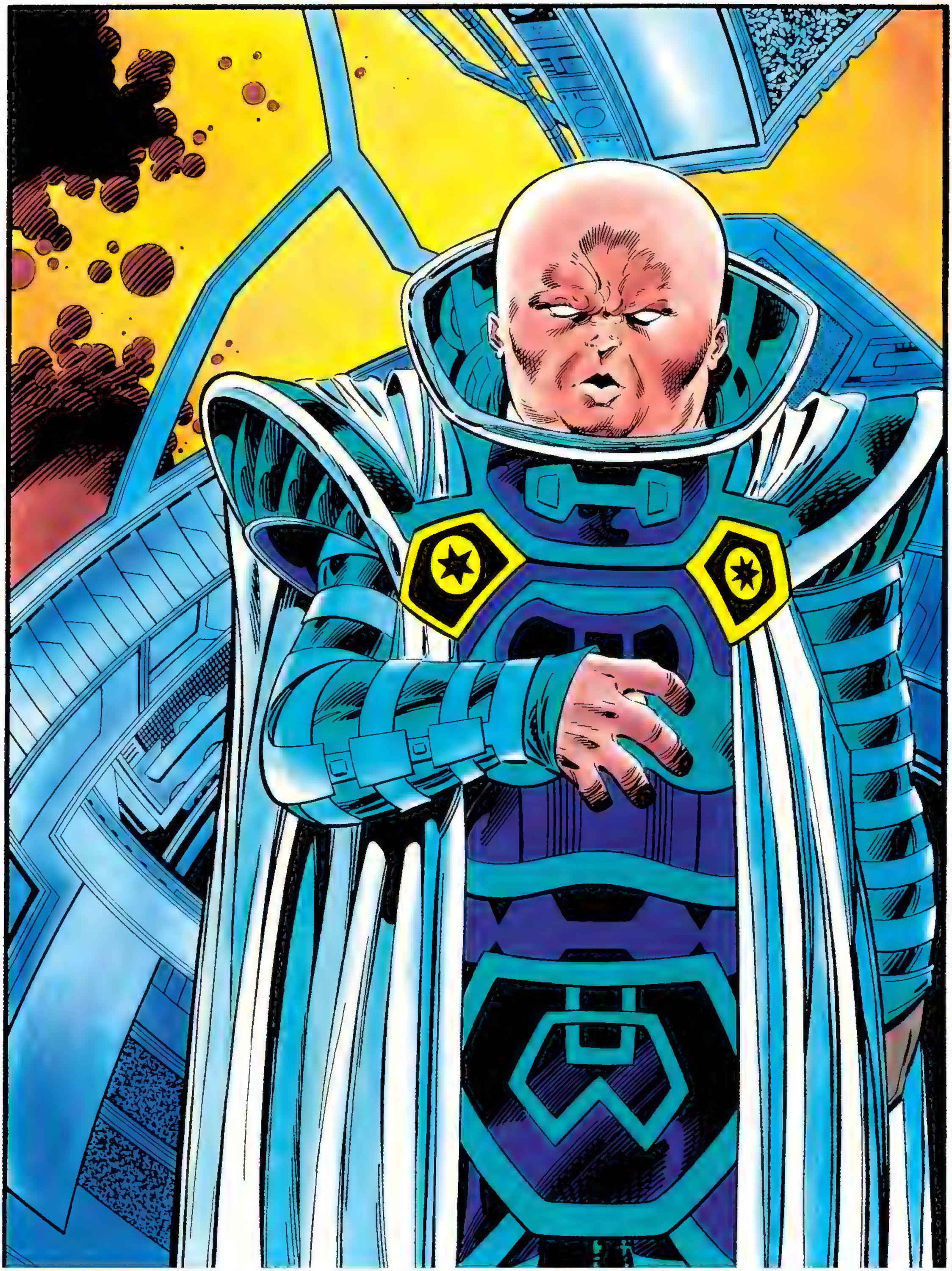
TAKEN BY SURPRISE? HOW CAN THIS ***BE***, MOST LOYAL OF MY HERALDS? YOU, WHO CAN COUNT THE ATOMS OF A GRAIN OF SAND ACROSS THE BREADTH OF A GALAXY!

HOW COULD ANY BEING CATCH YOU UNAWARES?

NOT JUST ANY BEING, ***GALACTUS.***

OR HAS IT BEEN **SO LONG** YOU NO LONGER RECALL...

...THE FACE OF THE ONE WHO **CREATED YOU!!**



Marvel Press Poster #12 – *The Sensational She-Hulk* (1984)
by John Byrne

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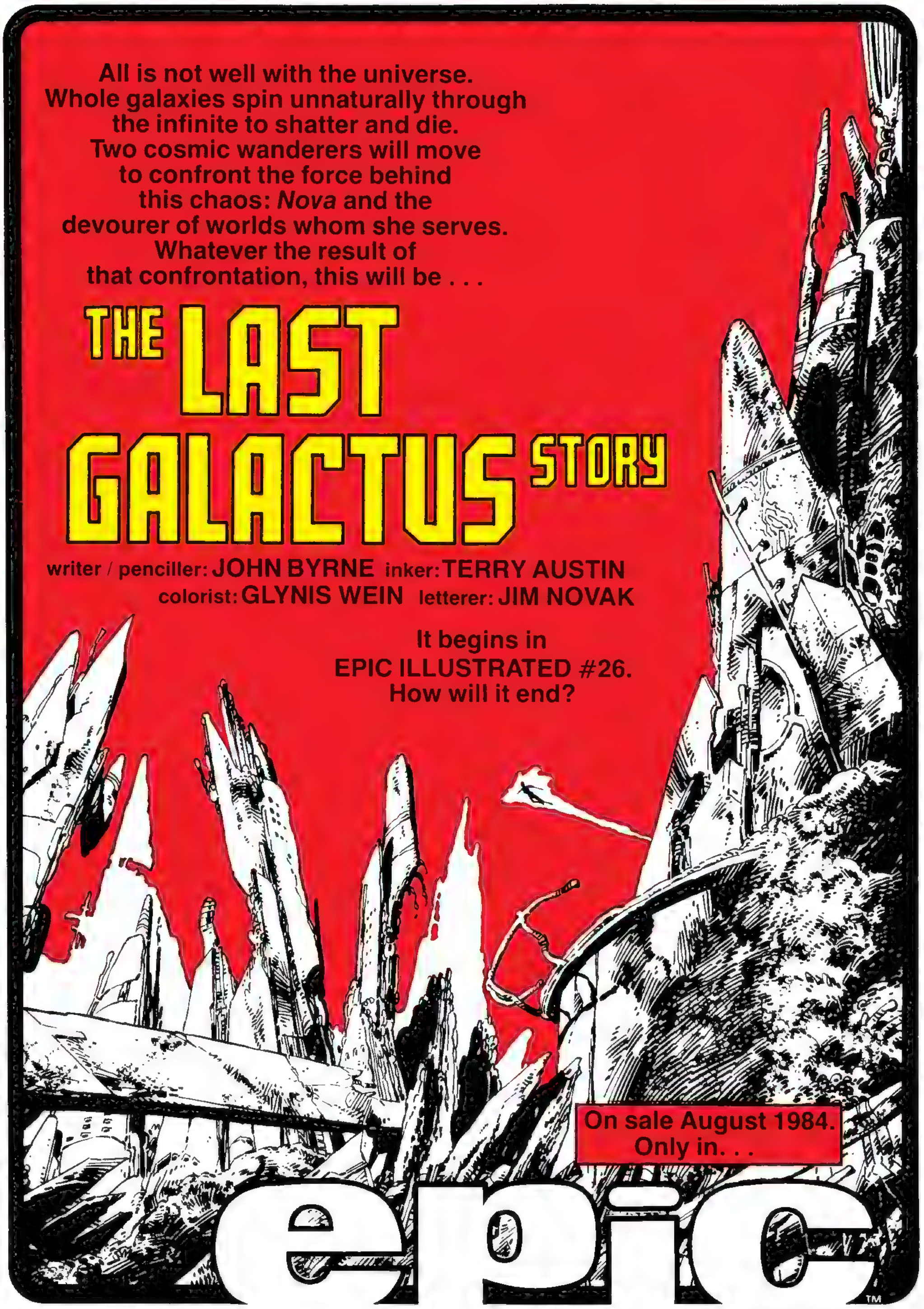
Marvel Age #19 (October 1984)
"The Last Galactus Story" house ad



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Marvel Age #20 (November 1984)
"The Last Galactus Story" house ad

All is not well with the universe.
Whole galaxies spin unnaturally through
the infinite to shatter and die.
Two cosmic wanderers will move
to confront the force behind
this chaos: *Nova* and the
devourer of worlds whom she serves.
Whatever the result of
that confrontation, this will be . . .

THE LAST GALACTUS STORY

writer / penciller: JOHN BYRNE inker: TERRY AUSTIN
colorist: GLYNIS WEIN letterer: JIM NOVAK

It begins in
EPIC ILLUSTRATED #26.
How will it end?

On sale August 1984.
Only in. . .

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Epic Illustrated #26 "The Last Galactus Story"
22" x 34" promotional poster

IF YOU HAVEN'T TRIED IT LATELY,
DON'T MISS IT NOW.

STARTING IN OUR OCTOBER ISSUE:
THE LAST GALACTUS STORY
BY JOHN BYRNE AND TERRY AUSTIN
COLORING BY GLYNIS WEIN

Epic Illustrated #26 cover original art
by Bill Sienkiewicz

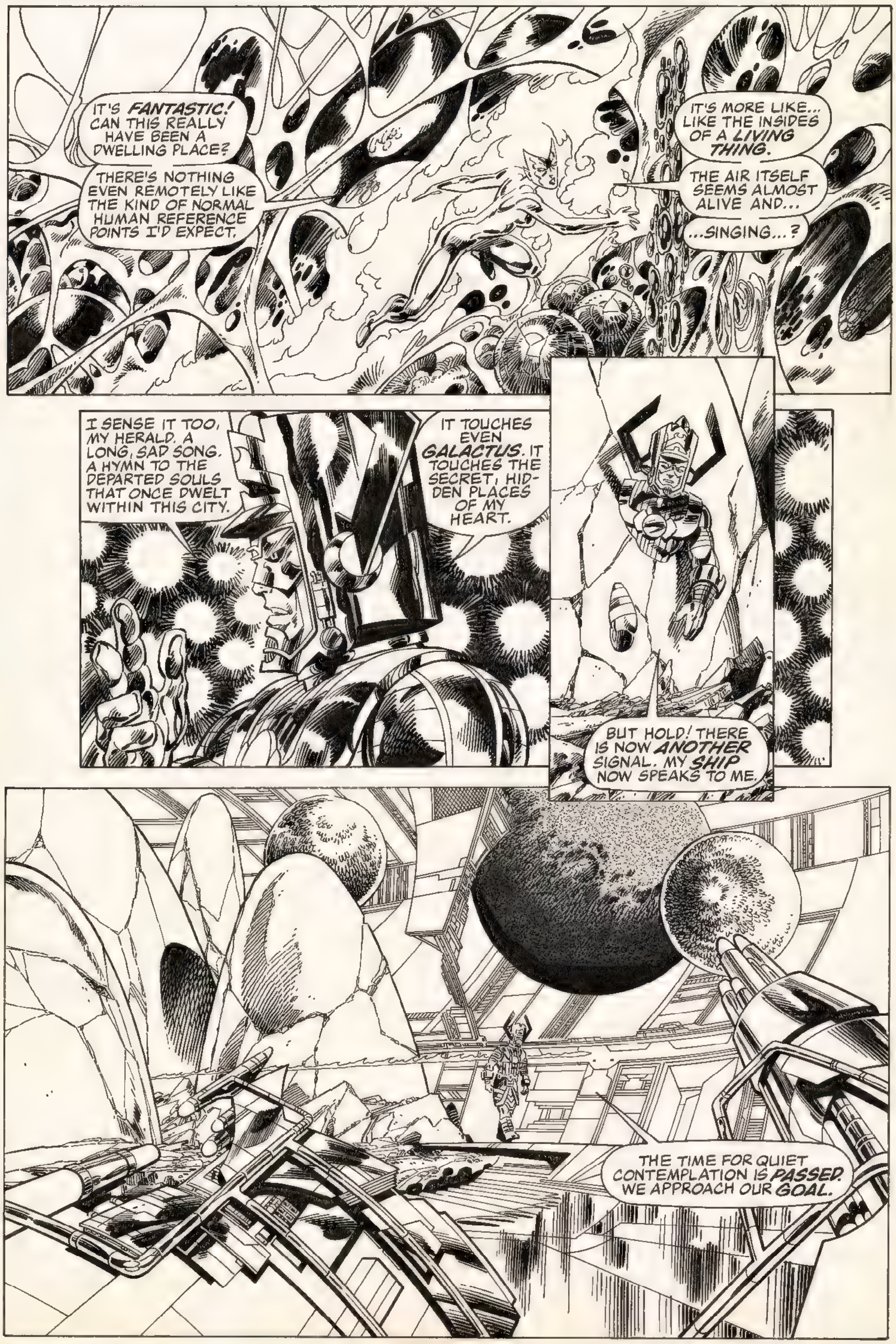
Epic Illustrated #31, "The Last Galactus Story," Chapter 6, page 1 original art
by John Byrne & Terry Austin

Courtesy Terry Austin

Epic Illustrated #31, "The Last Galactus Story," Chapter 6, page 2 original art
by John Byrne & Terry Austin

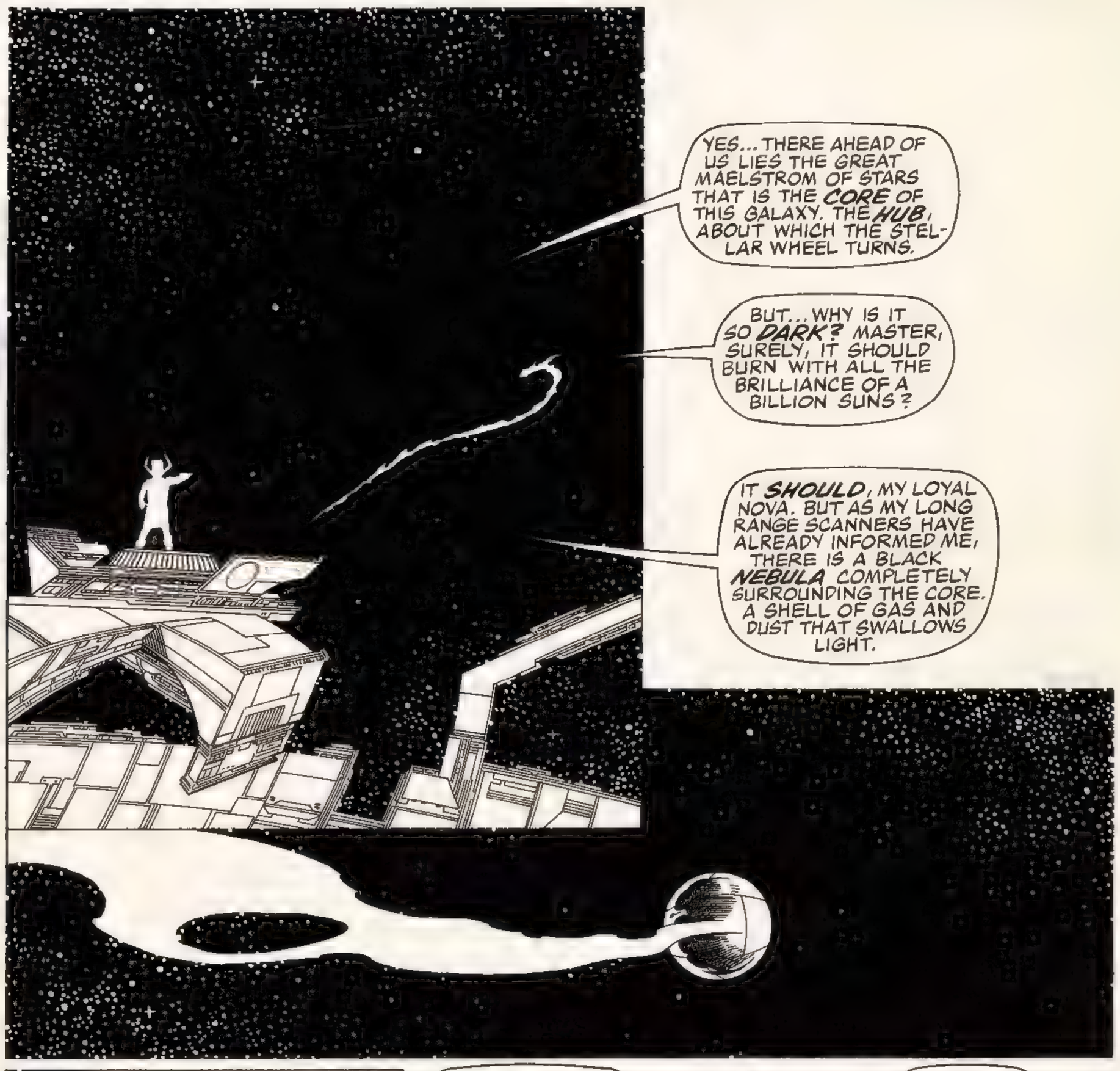
Courtesy Terry Austin

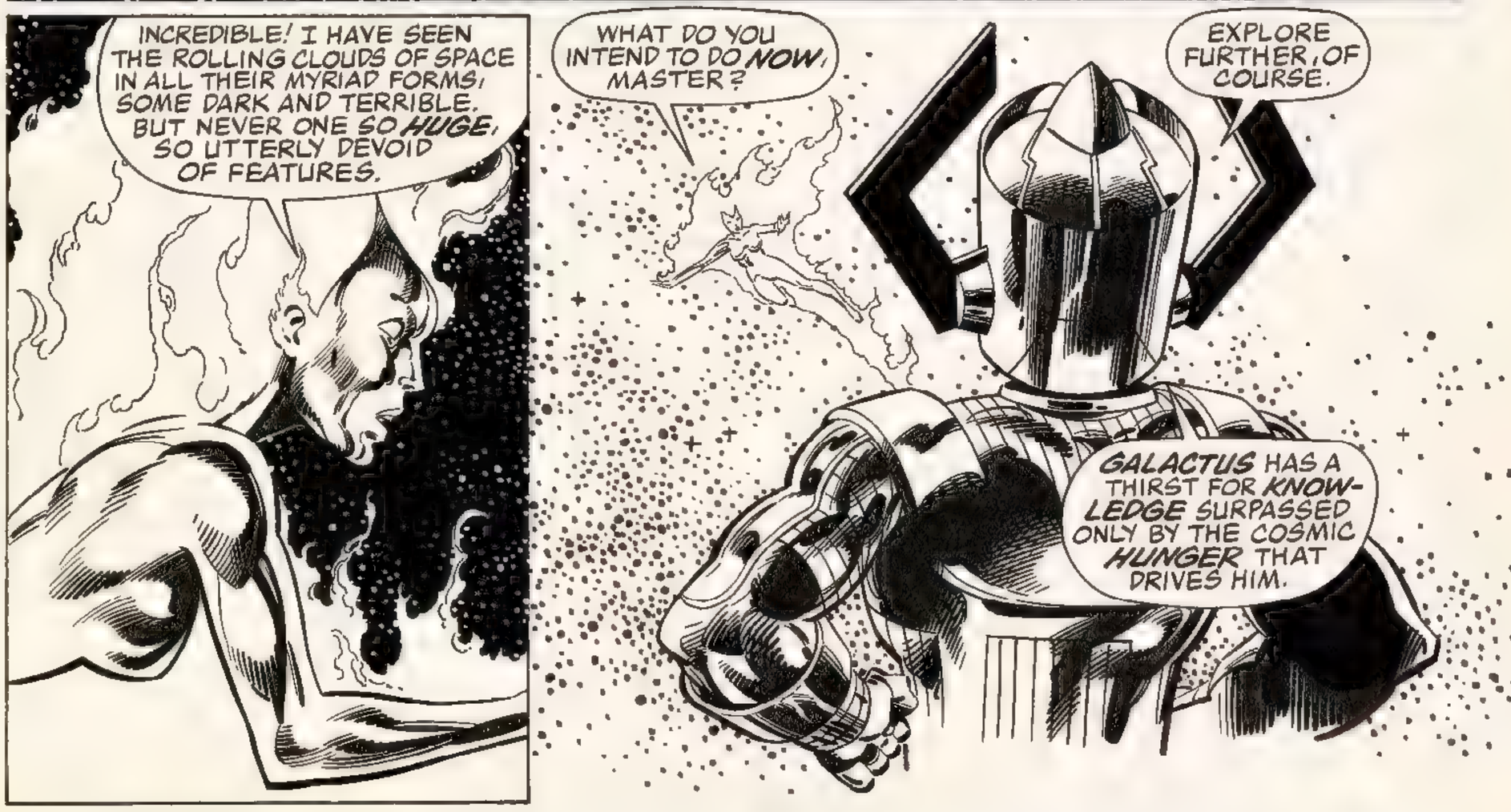
Epic Illustrated #31, "The Last Galactus Story," Chapter 6, page 3 original art
by John Byrne & Terry Austin



Courtesy Terry Austin

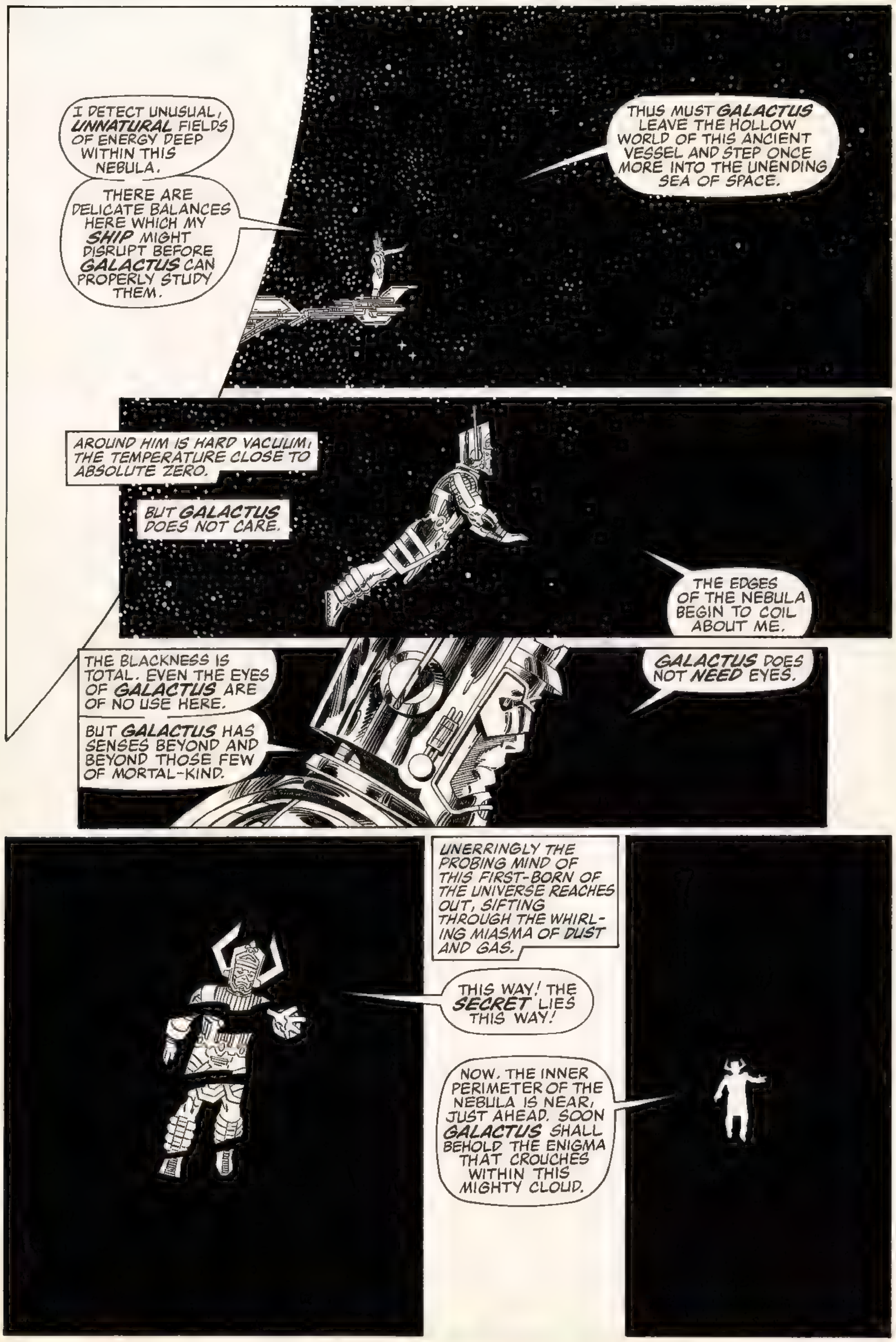
Epic Illustrated #31, "The Last Galactus Story," Chapter 6, page 4 original art
by John Byrne & Terry Austin





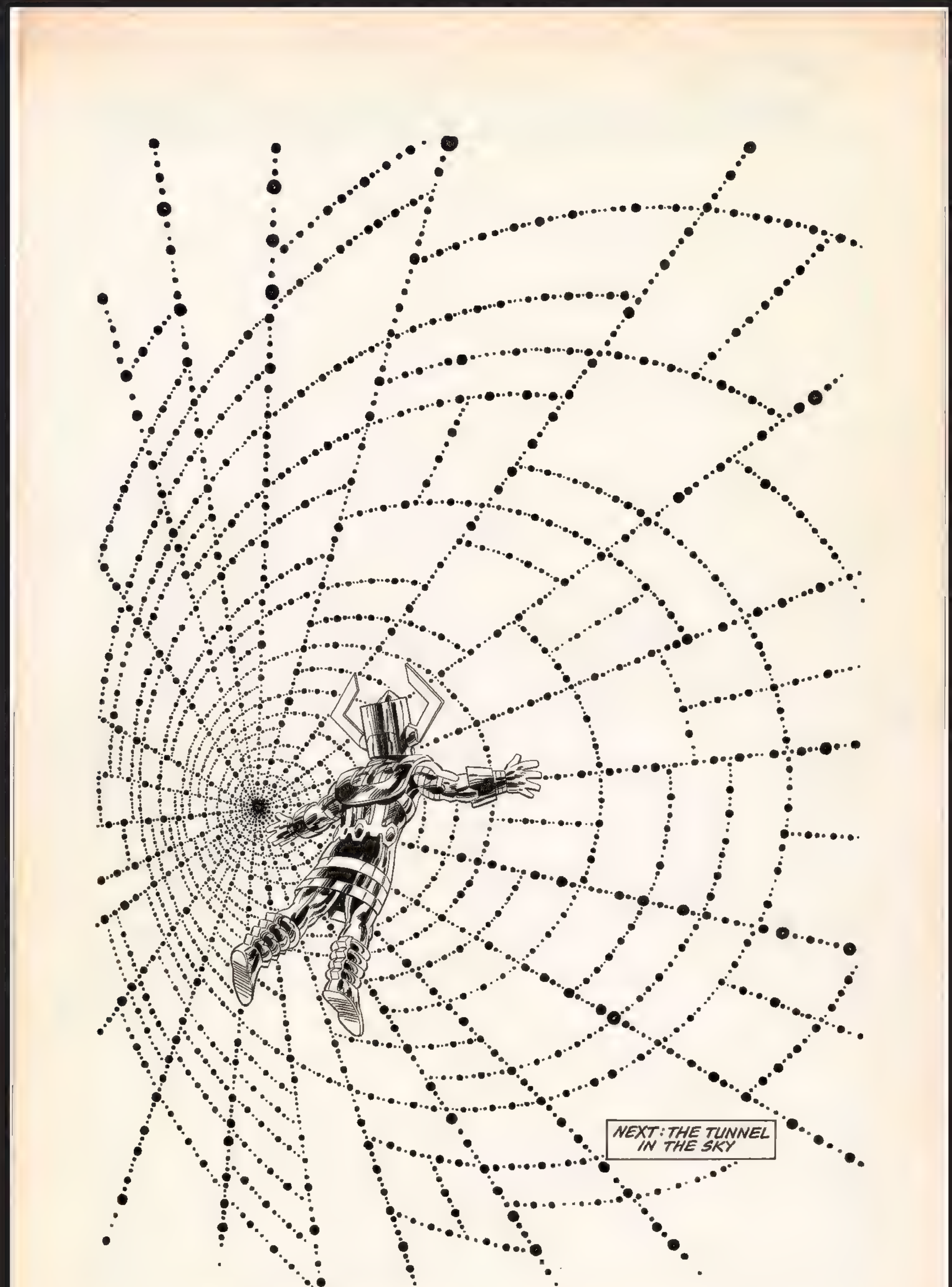
Courtesy Terry Austin

Epic Illustrated #31, "The Last Galactus Story," Chapter 6, page 5 original art
by John Byrne & Terry Austin



Courtesy Terry Austin

Epic Illustrated #31, "The Last Galactus Story," Chapter 6, page 6 original art
by John Byrne & Terry Austin



Courtesy Terry Austin

Epic Illustrated featured a brief teaser for each chapter of "The Last Galactus Story" on its contents page. They are combined into a single presentation below.

epic

ILLUSTRATED™

OCTOBER 1984 **VOL 1, NO. 26**

CONTENTS

The Last Galactus Story: Part I/Page 52
the first rumblings of intergalactic doom
story & pencils by John Byrne/ inks by Terry Austin/ colors by Glynis Wein

---

DECEMBER 1984 **VOL. 1, NO. 27**

CONTENTS

The Last Galactus Story: Chapter II/Page 91
the door is opened upon a cosmic dilemma
script & pencils by John Bryne/inks by Terry Austin/colors by Glynis Wein

---

FEBRUARY 1985 **VOL. 1, NO. 28**

CONTENTS

The Last Galactus Story: Chapter III/Page 9
Nova, the exile, returns to Earth
script & pencils by John Byrne/inks by Terry Austin
colors by Glynis Wein

APRIL 1985 **VOL. 1, NO. 29**

CONTENTS

The Last Galactus Story: Chapter IV/Page 15
say hello to literature's last refuge in a changing world
script & pencils by John Byrne/inks by Terry Austin/colors by Glynis Wein

---

JUNE 1985 **VOL. 1, No. 30**

CONTENTS

The Last Galactus Story: Chapter VI/Page 9
how do you handle a hungry man-god?
story & pencils by John Byrne/inks by Terry Austin/colors by Glynis Oliver

---

AUGUST 1985 **VOL. 1, No. 31**

CONTENTS

The Last Galactus Story/Page 91
oh, what a tangled web we weave, and check out the scale of that loom
story & pencils by John Byrne/inks by Terry Austin/colors by Glynis Oliver

---

OCTOBER 1985 **VOL. 1, No. 32**

CONTENTS

The Last Galactus Story/Page 9
light at the end of the tunnel and a couple of small surprises
story & pencils by John Byrne/inks by Terry Austin/colors by Glynis Wein

---

DECEMBER 1985 **VOL. 1, NO. 33**

CONTENTS

The Last Galactus Story/Page 9
light at the end of the tunnel and a couple of small surprises
story & pencils by John Byrne/inks by Terry Austin/colors by Glynis Wein

---

FEBRUARY 1986 **VOL. 1, NO. 34**

CONTENTS

The Last Galactus Story: Chapter Nine/Page 47
an unexpected reunion at the heart of darkness
story and pencils by John Byrne; inks by Terry Austin; colors by Glynis Oliver

Epic Illustrated editor Archie Goodwin penned these editorials for issues #26 (left), #28 (top center) and #34 (bottom center). Issue #34 featured a promo (right) for the continuation of "The Last Galactus Story." Despite multiple efforts at concluding the story in different formats with various creative combinations in the years since, it never came to be.

THE LAST GALACTUS STORY

In the very first issue of **Epic Illustrated,** we ran a story called **The Answer,** written by **Stan Lee,** artwork by **John Buscema** and **Rudy Nebres,** and coloring by **Rick Veitch.** Unlike other stories in that issue, it featured two characters from our regular Marvel Comics, the Silver Surfer and Galactus. The story was generally favorably regarded, but reaction to the use of Marvel characters in these pages was mixed. It was the first symptom of what we'd come in time to realize was a mild schizophrenia in our readership: some are regular comics fans, many are not. Those that are really wish we'd do more with regular Marvel characters; those that aren't seem to prefer (sometimes strongly) that we stay with our own material. Our own feeling is that, done right, we can please both sides (but not everybody *on* both sides, we know that *never* happens). Enter **John Byrne,** whom we've been hounding to do something for us since our first issue, and who, as writer-artist on Marvel's **Fantastic Four** comic, is our resident Galactus authority. He has this story he's been wanting to do, if maybe we could get **Terry Austin** to ink it... Terry's only the most in-demand inker at the moment in comics, but he thinks if the episodes weren't *too* long...We jumped for it. And got **Glynis Wein** as colorist in the bargain. Will **The Last Galactus Story** settle the split over whether we use or don't use Marvel characters? Probably not, because we think, depending on which character we use, it's going to create a different set of reactions each time we try it. But *this* time, we think John's story will have special resonance for those who have followed most of the appearances of Galactus in the Marvel titles, and yet work as a tale of cosmic forces in conflict for those who have no knowledge of the characters at all. We'll see for sure in about seven issues.

THE LAST GALACTUS STORY

Not exactly to our surprise, this continuing series by **John Byrne, Terry Austin,** and **Glynis Wein** has proven quite popular. But...we have had complaints. And the complaint is: why isn't each episode longer. The answer is that the series is utilizing three of the most in demand talents currently working in mainstream comics. Each of them is heavily committed and we've tried to pace the series so that it fits comfortably into their schedules and we don't run the risk of missing an issue.

BOB WIACEK: THE MAN, THE LEGEND, THE UNCREDITED INKER

Last issue, we ran a double-length episode of our ongoing series, **The Last Galactus Story.** Because the longer episode took writer/penciler **John Byrne** more time to complete his end of the chapter, the regular inker, **Terry Austin,** found he couldn't fit this episode into his schedule. Trooper that he is, Terry didn't leave us in the lurch. He talked his friend and fellow inker, **Bob Wiacek,** into filling in for him. A good choice. Bob and Terry both apprenticed under the same top-flight inker, **Dick Giordano** (who, rumor has it, does some occasional comic book editing these days in between inking assignments) and both have earned a great deal of experience and praise with their handling of Byrne's work—Terry on **X-Men** and Bob on **Alpha Flight** and, more recently, **The Hulk.** As a show of appreciation for Bob's good deed, we not only failed to mention his guest appearance here in the **Overview** column, we also—as we do automatically each month on any continuing featured—picked up Terry Austin's inking credit from the previous **Contents Page** and ran it where Bob's should have gone. So, the upshot for helping us out in a pinch was absolutely no credit at all for Mr. Wiacek. Luckily for Bob, it was our next-to-the-last issue instead of the last. We have this space in which to make amends. Bob, our apologies for the oversight and we promise faithfully that it won't happen again. At least never in these pages.

—Archie Goodwin

IT'S NOT OVER YET

COMING THIS SPRING

AN EPIC SPECIAL

featuring

the CONCLUSION of the LAST GALACTUS STORY

by JOHN BYRNE and TERRY AUSTIN

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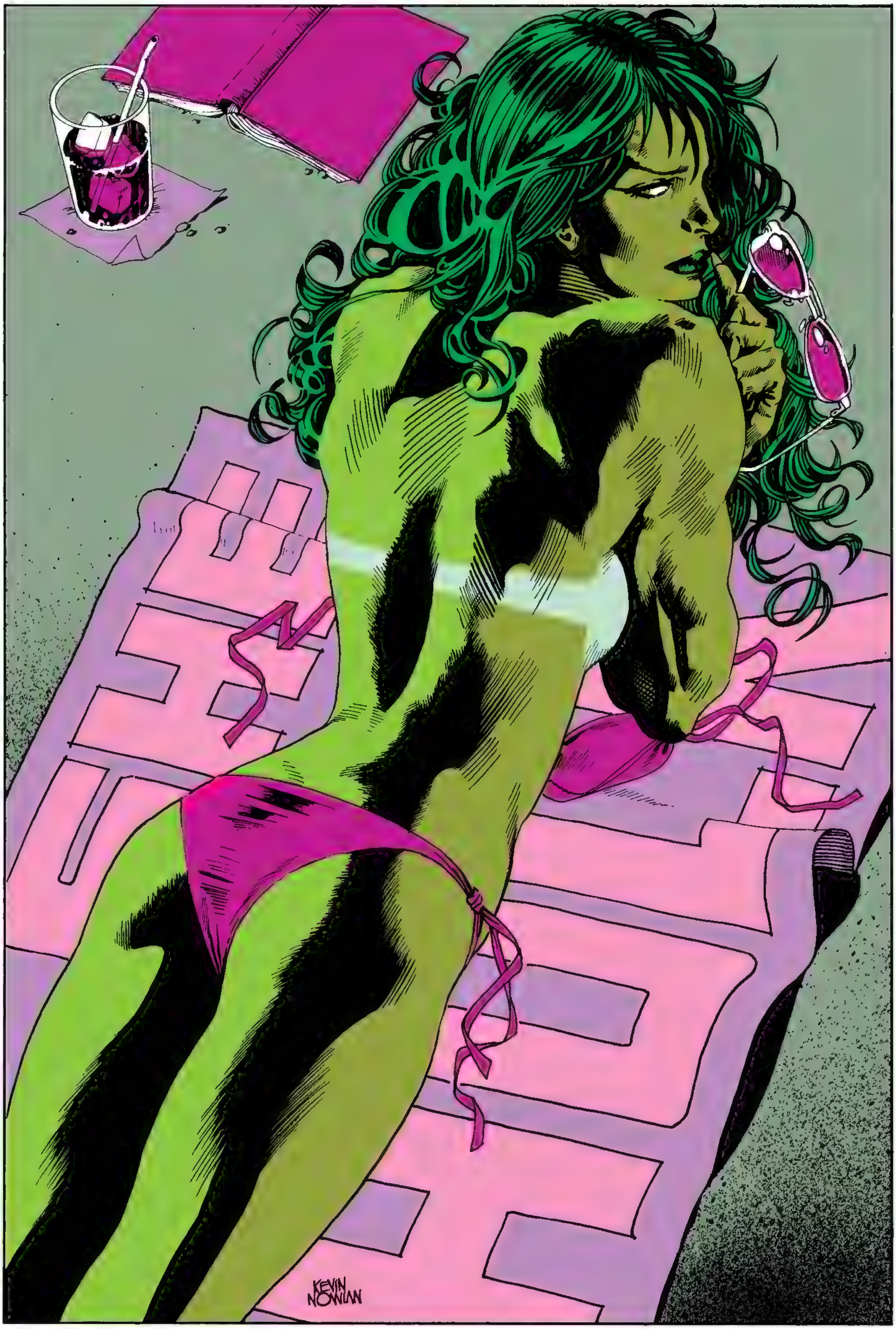
Marvel Fanfare #18 (January 1985) Nova pinup
by Kevin Nowlan

Kevin Nowlan's *Marvel Fanfare* #18 (January 1985) She-Hulk pinup was the inspiration behind John Byrne's *Fantastic Four* #275 story "The Naked Truth."



Marvel Fanfare #18 (January 1985) Doctor Doom pinup
by Terry Austin

Fantastic Four Visionaries: John Byrne Vol. 5 TPB (2005) cover
by Mark Bright, John Byrne & Chris Sotomayor

Reprinting *The Fantastic Four* #268-275 & *Annual* #18 and *The Thing* #19

BIOGRAPHIES

JOHN BYRNE

With his naturalistic style captivating legions of fans, John Byrne became one of the most influential and popular comic artists of the '70s and '80s. Born in England but raised in Canada, with four years of art school training under his belt, Byrne headed straight for the comics business, getting his start with Charlton Comics.

He produced his first original creations, the robot Rog-2000—which appeared as a backup strip in *E-Man*—and *Doomsday +1* at Charlton. Though the art was rough compared to his later standards, it drew the attention of Marvel Comics, where he found work on *Champions*, *Iron Fist* and *Marvel Team-Up*. The relationship he established on these books with writer Chris Claremont led to his entry on a title that was rapidly ascending in importance at Marvel: the "All-New, All-Different" *X-Men*.

Taking the torch from Dave Cockrum, for the next five years Byrne penciled and co-plotted the adventures of Marvel's mutants. His fresh style translated perfectly to the new cast of characters, and together Byrne and Claremont built the X-Men into a keystone title at Marvel. However, just after the twin triumphs of "The Dark Phoenix Saga" and "Days of Future Past," Byrne left the book.

His next major achievement was a long run as writer/artist on *Fantastic Four* that restored the title to its imaginative best. His run hearkened back to the glory days of Lee and Kirby and is arguably the milestone achievement of his career. Other high points in his early '80s Marvel work included "War and Remembrance," a bracing set of Captain America stories with Roger Stern and *Alpha Flight*, a team of Canadian heroes written and drawn by Byrne.

Next, Byrne headed to DC Comics to revive the flagging Superman franchise with a reset of the Superman mythos that was enormously popular at the time and is still hailed as a masterpiece decades later. After two years helming Superman, Byrne returned to Marvel to work on a diverse set of books including the New Universe's *Star Brand*, the irreverent *Sensational She-Hulk* and the high-tech adventures of Iron Man. In the 1990s, Byrne launched his creator-owned series *Next Men*, scripted the first issues of Mike Mignola's *Hellboy* and delivered the goods for both Marvel and DC on numerous titles. Today, the implacable Byrne continues to write, draw and preside over a popular website. He was inducted into the Eisner Hall of Fame in 2015.

MARK D. BRIGHT

Illustrator Mark D. Bright was born in 1955 in New Jersey and he became an ardent fan of comic books after indulging in the stacks made available to idle children at his grandmother's hair salon. Bright graduated from Montclair High School in 1974; afterward, he would attend the Pratt Institute and earn a BFA in 1978. During his schooling, he submitted relentlessly to DC Comics, eventually drawing a pair of stories in DC's horror anthologies in the late '70s. After graduating from art school, Bright stepped up his efforts and eventually landed with Marvel in 1981, penciling issues of *Dazzler*, *Thor*, *Avengers* and the 1983 *Falcon* miniseries, before settling into long runs on *Power Man and Iron Fist* and *Iron Man*. Bright also illustrated the fondly remembered *Spider-Man vs. Wolverine* one-shot in 1987, as well as the Hawkeye serial in the *Solo Avengers* anthology. In 1988, Bright started a long association with DC's Green Lantern, first drawing the character in several installments of *Action Comics Weekly*, then in *Green Lantern: Emerald Dawn* and its sequel miniseries. In a two-year run on the flagship *Green Lantern* title, Bright illustrated stories with both the John Stewart and Hal Jordan iterations of the character. Also with DC, Bright drew multiple issues of Batman and cocreated the series *A. Bizarro* with Steve Gerber. In 1993, Bright joined other African-American comic book creators at DC's Milestone imprint, launching the series *Icon* with writer Dwayne McDuffie and drawing the series for most of its four-year run. He reunited with *Falcon* writer Christopher Priest to create *Quantum and Woody* at Valiant. In the 2000s, Bright moved increasingly towards work in film and animation storyboards, but returned to comics here and there, drawing Bill Jemas' 2003 series *Marville* and a 2006 tale featuring D.P.7 in *Untold Tales of the New Universe*.

MIKE CARLIN

Born in 1958, Mike Carlin graduated from New York City's High School of Art and Design in 1976. Seemingly destined for a career in comics, Carlin pursued an undergraduate degree in cartooning from the School of Visual Arts, which he completed in 1980. All the while, he'd worked as an intern at DC, and after graduating from college, he signed on with Marvel. His early efforts were writing and drawing humor stories in *Crazy Magazine* and *Bizarre Adventures*, but in 1983 Carlin put his drawing pencil down and focused on editing and writing. He followed Bruce Jones as the writer on *Ka-Zar the Savage*, John Byrne on *The Thing* and had brief stints writing *Dazzler* and *Captain America*. He served as editor on many of these titles as well, and also presided over *Fantastic Four* and *ROM*. After writing the first eight issues of *Masters of the Universe* for Marvel's Star imprint, Carlin left for DC, becoming group editor of the Superman titles, shepherding the line through the blockbuster "Death of Superman" event. He also scripted several issues of *Star Trek* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. By the late '90s, Carlin rose to DC Executive Editor and then Creative Director of Animation in 2011. Along the way, he scripted several episodes of the *Superboy* TV series.

MARK GRUENWALD

Few can lay claim to the influence that Mark Gruenwald had on Marvel as an editor, writer and artist during the 1980s and

'90s. Born in 1953 in Wisconsin, Gruenwald's love of comics manifested in a fanzine titled *Omniverse*, which led to writing articles for the DC-published fanzine *Amazing World of DC Comics*. In 1978, he was hired by Jim Shooter to serve as an assistant editor at Marvel. In addition, Gruenwald also scripted several titles. He was ongoing writer of *Spider-Woman* in 1978-79, he kicked off a long run co-scripting *Marvel Two-In-One* with the "Project Pegasus" arc, and he co-wrote a handful of stories in *What If?* and *Thor*. Early in his career, Gruenwald also penciled a number of titles, including issues of *Questprobe*, *Incredible Hulk* and *Marvel Team-Up*. His major art credit was drawing the 1983 *Hawkeye* miniseries, which he also scripted.

A well-known continuity hound and office jokester, Gruenwald gave T-shirts emblazoned with the catchphrase "Continuity or Bust" to his office peers. His deep love of the Marvel mythos didn't stop with T-shirts. As a writer, he delved deep into Marvel's past with his "Untold Tales of the Marvel Universe" backup stories in *What If?*, as well as the secret origin of the High Evolutionary in the 1989 "Evolutionary War" event. Gruenwald's biggest achievement in grappling with the encyclopedic history of Marvel was his development of *The Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe*, a series compiling the backgrounds of virtually every Marvel character. Eager fans devoured *OHOTMU*, and the series' success led to multiple sequels and updates that continue today.

Gruenwald's biggest accomplishment as a writer came with *Captain America*, a title which he wrote for an astonishing 137-issue run from 1985-1995. He also kicked off long runs on *Quasar* and the New Universe title *D.P. 7*. His critically acclaimed magnum opus, *Squadron Supreme*, a 12-issue miniseries, reestablished the alternate-reality Marvel team. When Tom DeFalco was named editor-in-chief in 1988, Gruenwald became his second-in-command with the title of executive editor. As an editor, he worked closely to mentor young writers, bringing an unforgettable sense of fun to the deadline slog. Tragically, Gruenwald passed away in 1996 due to an unknown heart ailment. In his will, he requested his ashes be mixed with ink used in the first printing of the *Squadron Supreme* trade paperback.

RON WILSON

Brooklyn-born Ron Wilson took his comic art aspirations to Marvel as an 18-year-old and was told by veteran Frank Giacoia that his talent level was "six months away" from getting him work. In 1973, as freshman at the Brooklyn Technical College of Art, Wilson submitted new samples and was hired to draw stories in Marvel's horror comics. Soon, Wilson turned out quick and quality work on covers, learning the ropes beside the production staff and legends such as John Buscema. Stories in *Power Man*, *Giant-Size Man-Thing* and *Master of Kung Fu* led to the title—and character—he would be most associated with for the rest of his career: the Thing's *Marvel Two-In-One*. He drew most of the next thirty issues of the title, took a respite to draw the black-and-white *The Hulk!* magazine, and then returned to *Marvel Two-In-One* in the latter part of 1980 to draw most of the rest of its 100-issue run. Once the team-up concept for the Thing drew to a close, Wilson was given the launch of a new *Thing* solo series written by John Byrne; he would draw the first 33 issues of the title. Other credits of the late '80s include the *Wolfpack* mini-series and graphic novel written by Larry Hama, the Star Comics adaptation of *Masters of the Universe*, and *Super Boxers*, Wilson's creator-owned graphic novel collaboration with Byrne. In the 1990s, Wilson left monthly comic book illustration but he continues to work today as a commission artist.

Biographies researched and written by John Rhett Thomas

MARVEL MASTERWORKS

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THE GOLDEN AGE

As the Great Depression wore on and the specter of war hung over America, a new storytelling medium was born: the comic book. Within their four-color pages, larger-than-life super heroes could make short work of America's foes, giving readers of all ages hope for victory against the real-life enemies that faced the United States. At the forefront of this new medium was Timely Comics, a young company staffed by such legendary creators as Carl Burgos, Bill Everett, Joe Simon, Jack Kirby and Stan Lee.

GOLDEN AGE ALL-WINNERS VOLS. 1-4
GOLDEN AGE CAPTAIN AMERICA VOLS. 1-6
GOLDEN AGE DARING MYSTERY VOLS. 1-2
GOLDEN AGE HUMAN TORCH VOLS. 1-3
GOLDEN AGE MARVEL COMICS VOLS. 1-7
GOLDEN AGE MYSTIC COMICS VOL. 1
GOLDEN AGE SUB-MARINER VOLS. 1-3
GOLDEN AGE U.S.A. COMICS VOLS. 1-2
GOLDEN AGE YOUNG ALLIES VOLS. 1-2

THE ATLAS ERA

Seeing super heroes waning, Timely Comics evolved into Atlas Comics and took on a vast new range of genres: science-fiction tales of outer space adventures; realistic war comics; buxom jungle heroines; horror comics that would become the center of a moral panic that rocked the industry; and romance comics for the emerging teen audience. Even the classic costumed heroes of the Golden Age retooled to take on the threat of Communism. From Western gunfighters to crime to horror, the Atlas Era had it all!

ATLAS ERA BATTLEFIELD VOL. 1
ATLAS ERA BLACK KNIGHT/YELLOW CLAW VOL. 1
ATLAS ERA HEROES VOLS. 1-3
ATLAS ERA JOURNEY INTO MYSTERY VOLS. 1-4
ATLAS ERA JUNGLE ADVENTURE VOLS. 1-3
ATLAS ERA MENACE VOL. 1
ATLAS ERA STRANGE TALES VOLS. 1-6
ATLAS ERA TALES TO ASTONISH VOLS. 1-4
ATLAS ERA TALES OF SUSPENSE VOLS. 1-4
ATLAS ERA VENUS VOL. 1

THE MARVEL AGE

In August 1961, change hit newsstands: *The Fantastic Four* #1 did not feature the squeaky-clean heroes of yesteryear. They were real characters placed in extraordinary circumstances. They lived together, they fought among themselves — and sometimes, they even lost to the bad guys. This was more than a change in attitude: It was the beginning of something entirely different — the beginning of the Marvel Age of Comics!

Thanks to the fertile imaginations of Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko and others, an unending list of heroes followed the FF with ever-increasing acclaim and popularity: the Amazing Spider-Man, the Mighty Thor, the Incredible Hulk, Daredevil, Iron Man and the X-Men, to name but a few. These were the Marvel heroes, born of conflict and a continuous struggle to balance human lives with superhuman responsibilities.

THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN VOLS. 1-24
ANT-MAN/GIANT-MAN VOLS. 1-3
THE AVENGERS VOLS. 1-23
THE BLACK PANTHER VOLS. 1-3
BROTHER VOODOO VOL. 1
CAPTAIN AMERICA VOLS. 1-15
CAPTAIN MARVEL VOLS. 1-6
THE CHAMPIONS VOL. 1
DAREDEVIL VOLS. 1-17
DAZZLER VOLS. 1-4
DEATHLOK VOL. 1
THE DEFENDERS VOLS. 1-8
DOCTOR STRANGE VOLS. 1-10
THE FANTASTIC FOUR VOLS. 1-25
GHOST RIDER VOLS. 1-5
HOWARD THE DUCK VOLS. 1-2
THE HUMAN TORCH VOLS. 1-2
THE INCREDIBLE HULK VOLS. 1-17
THE INHUMANS VOLS. 1-2
THE INVINCIBLE IRON MAN VOLS. 1-16
IRON FIST VOLS. 1-2
KA-ZAR VOLS. 1-3
KILLRAVEN VOL. 1
LUKE CAGE VOLS. 1-3
MARVEL RARITIES VOL. 1
MARVEL TEAM-UP VOLS. 1-6
MARVEL TWO-IN-ONE VOLS. 1-6
THE MIGHTY THOR VOLS. 1-21
MS. MARVEL VOLS. 1-2
NICK FURY, AGENT OF S.H.I.E.L.D. VOLS. 1-3
NOT BRAND ECHH VOL. 1
RAWHIDE KID VOLS. 1-2
THE SAVAGE SHE-HULK VOLS. 1-2
SGT. FURY VOLS. 1-4
THE SPECTACULAR SPIDER-MAN VOLS. 1-6
SPIDER-WOMAN VOLS. 1-3
THE SILVER SURFER VOLS. 1-2
THE SUB-MARINER VOLS. 1-8
THE TOMB OF DRACULA VOLS. 1-2
WARLOCK VOLS. 1-2
WEREWOLF BY NIGHT VOL. 1
THE X-MEN VOLS. 1-8
THE UNCANNY X-MEN VOLS. 1-15

MARVEL ANNUAL
AT LONG LAST!
THE WEDDING OF BLACK BOLT AND MEDUSA!
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OUR MOST POWERFUL MISSILES ARE USELESS...WE'RE DOOMED!
NO! THERE MUST BE A WAY TO STOP GORMUU... AND I WILL FIND IT!

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COWBOYS & IDIOMS!

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--WHAT'S BIG AND GREEN AND HAS A STAPLE IN HER NAVEL?

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THAT'S IT! I'VE HAD ENOUGH!
WHO NEEDS THE Fantastic Four ANYWAY?!
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epic
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Beginning this issue:
THE LAST GALACTUS STORY
by
John Byrne
& Terry Austin
plus:
the conclusion of
THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE